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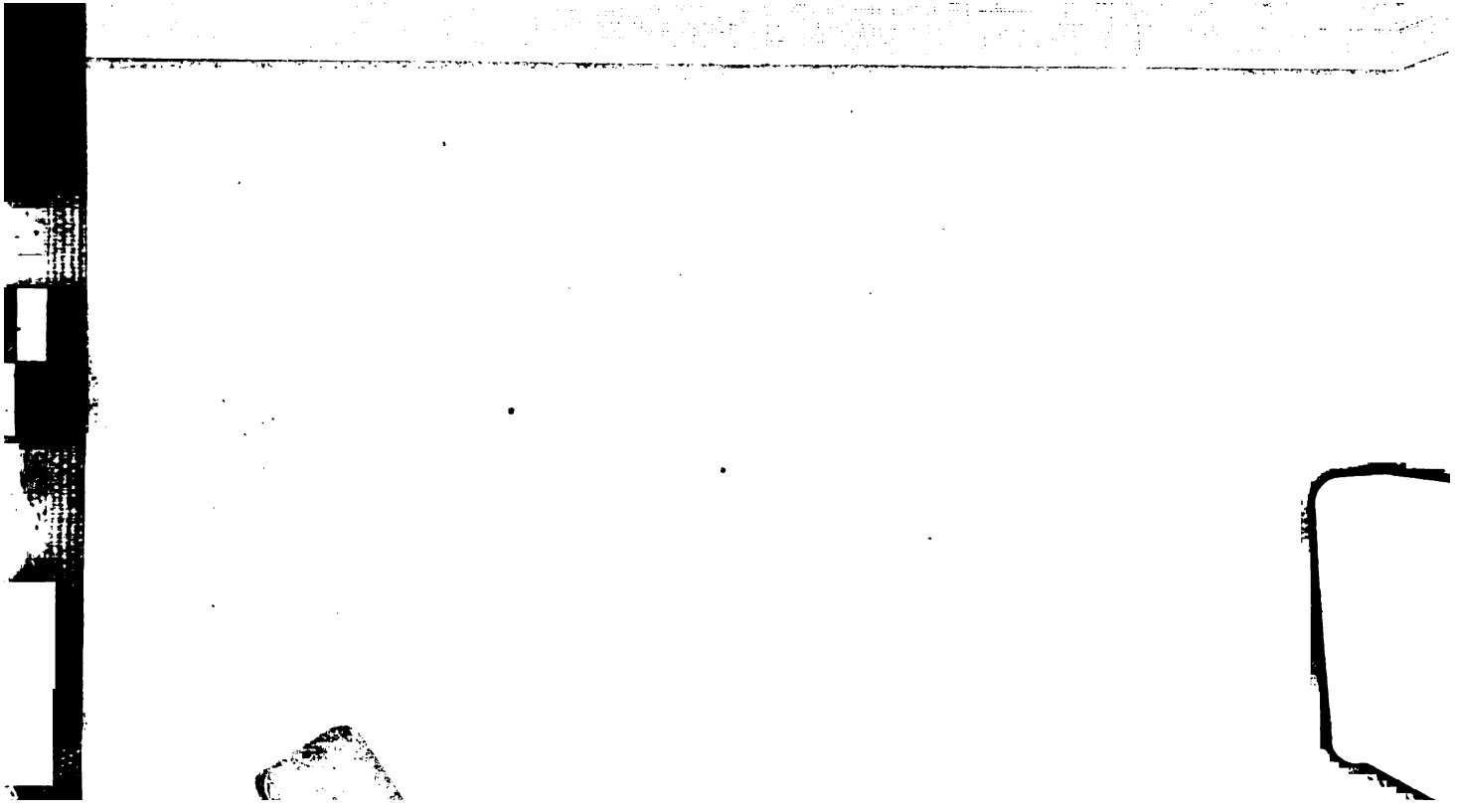

THE WATERS OF DESTRUCTION

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BY

ALICE PERRIN

AUTHOR OF 'EAST OF SUEZ,' 'THE STRONGER CLAIM,' ETC.

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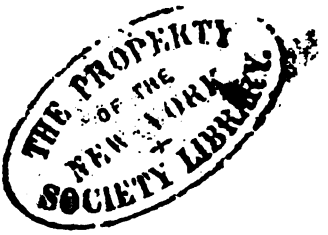

BOOK I

THE

WATERS OF DESTRUCTION

CHAPTER I

'SAHIB! sahib! sahib!'

The low, persistent voice continued with monotonous regularity until the Englishman, asleep on the narrow webbing bed, moved and threw out his arms. The room was almost dark, but beyond the native figure that blocked the doorway the topaz-yellow of the Indian dawn was creeping up the sky. The old bearer stood patiently, and called till he was satisfied that his master was really awake, then he turned away, and Stephen Dare rose from his bed still drowsy with the slumber of young manhood.

The light grew and deepened to orange, and later, when he stepped out into the veranda, the Eastern sun had come blazing up in triumph, and everywhere living things answered to the trumpet-call of morning. From the servants' quarters that flanked the square white building, came the shrill voices of women and children, and the clatter of brass cooking-vessels; gray partridges called to each other from the more distant clumps of grass; newly-released fowls ran in every direction; a white kid was per-

forming ridiculous antics around its bleating mother; and the harsh creak of the well-wheel scraped loudly through the pure, soft air. It was just at the end of the Indian winter, when, up-country, the mornings are still fresh without sharpness, and the sun gives but a hint of what is coming later on. Dew hung to the scanty grass, a tender haze softened the flat, yellow distance that was only occasionally broken by thin lines of trees and heavy mango-groves; cool scents of opening blossoms—acacia, lime, mango—floated in whiffs on a faint breeze.

In the bare patch of compound that faced the little bungalow Dare's white, country-bred pony waited ready saddled. She neighed softly as he came towards her, and she took a piece of bread from his hand with gentle eagerness, but immediately afterwards laid back her ears, squealed, and stamped viciously. The syce jerked her mouth and shouted reproachful abuse, scandalized by her want of manners. Dare laughed and stepped out of her reach.

'Jane, you're an ungrateful little beast!' he said, and shook his fist at her, then turned to acknowledge the boisterous greetings of three dogs, just let loose, that threw themselves upon him leaping and yelping. 'Bring the mare along,' he added presently in Hindustani to the syce, 'I'll walk as far as the aqueduct.'

He moved quickly forward with Sally, the fox terrier, all jealous affection and tender sensitive feelings, close at his heels; while Slipper, a powerful dog of frankly pariah descent, though one of Nature's gentlemen, and Pluck, who had strong claims to

recognition as an Irish terrier, rushed ahead with kangaroo bounds, and hostile intentions towards brown monkeys. Dare held his sun-hat in his hand for the first few minutes. His fair head was thrown back, his blue eyes were bright in his tanned face, he whistled gaily as he walked, for his heart was light, his spirits high, not with the glory of the morning—though this unconsciously increased his gladness—but because last night's post had brought him the sanction of his first leave. Soon he would be wading through deep green meadows, looking again on the favourite places of his boyhood, leaving India, hard work, and the loneliness he so abominated far behind.

Dare was an Irrigation Officer of three years' standing—three years that, until lately, had passed with such pleasant smoothness and congeniality that India had impressed him as a most desirable quarter of the globe. But then Dare had been unusually fortunate, seing that his first 'sub-division,' or portion of canal of which he was given charge, had lain within easy reach of his headquarters—a large military station. Much of his time had of necessity to be spent on the canal banks moving from one inspection-house to another, but he had seldom been so far distant as to prevent his riding into the station for dinners, dances, and other entertainments. He had shared a bungalow with another young engineer, and in moderation had contrived to play polo, tennis, cards, hunt with the bobbery pack, and, to quote his own opinion, 'have a rattling good time.'

Suddenly all this was changed. At the beginning of his third cold weather orders came down from Government that Mr. Dare was to proceed to Nandi, a lonely sub-division in a remote and unpopular district fifty miles from any railway, and thirty even from a little civil station; where his headquarters would be a four-roomed inspection-house with a flat roof and white-washed walls, surrounded by a level, uninteresting landscape, and standing almost on the banks of the Kali Nadi, a slow, shallow river, crossed at its narrowest point by the aqueduct which it would be his principal duty to watch over and keep in order. And this was no small responsibility, for the great engineering creation bore across the uncertain river a vast volume of water to be distributed over countless acres, to irrigate thousands of villages, to convert parched, arid plains, far removed from the heavy rainfall of the hills, into profitable cultivated lands.

Dare's consternation when he received his transfer orders was almost ludicrous. People laughed and told him he had been spoilt; his superior officers said it was quite time he should have more experience and responsibility; protest he knew would be unwise as well as ineffectual, and he could only pack his belongings with gloomy resignation and remove himself obediently from civilization. At first he honestly endeavoured to reconcile his nature to his new life. The work was interesting, though, to him, not so entirely absorbing as to compensate for the lack of companionship; for he was young, his nature was gregarious, and the romance of his pro-

fession had as yet laid no definite hold on him. The knowledge that the water under his control was saving millions of lives, reclaiming hundreds of square miles, steadily swelling the revenue of the great country, caused him no particular emotion. He accepted it as an official fact without elation of spirit. He regulated the supply of water in the distributaries, considered petitions from the cultivators, settled disputes, and judged offenders. He kept pace with his sub-divisional accounts, his reports, and official correspondence, and he journeyed industriously up and down the canal banks inspecting all that was under his charge. There was good small-game shooting in the district, and Dare was a keen sportsman; he exercised his two ponies, and took the dogs out after hares, jackals, foxes. In the evenings he read novels, and smoked more than was good for him. And all the time he valiantly fought against the discontent that grew stronger as each lonely month dragged by.

But as the cold weather waned his courage flagged, the solitude chafed his spirit; he yearned for the society of his own kind, and he tired of his books. To sit still became increasingly irksome to him when his work and exercise were over, and often he went to bed from sheer boredom directly after his dinner. Trifles began to assume an unnatural importance, and the sight of little Mr. Green, a country-bred subordinate who lived on the further side of the aqueduct, became a positive pleasure, because his pasty face was at least white, and his speech comparatively English.

Dare grew uneasy about himself. He had met fellows in his own department who for years had led this kind of existence, and they had filled him with wondering pity; their manners and clothes had aroused his indulgent contempt. Beyond the details and technicalities of their profession their minds seemed to contain nothing; they had apparently lost all sense of social ambition, interest in the world, human vitality; they were awkward, taciturn, dull. He dreaded to become one of them, and he felt that even five months of Nandi had affected him. What would happen if he were left here indefinitely?

A sudden hatred for India gripped him—for the sun and the cloudless blue of the sky; for the vastness of the country and the food which was unavoidably monotonous in such an outlying spot. He was attacked by a morbid home-sickness, thought continually of England, and recalled with sentiment the gray walls of Daresfield, ivy-hung and lichen-stained, which had seen him grow up; the faces of the old servants, his uncle's harsh voice reading prayers, the open front door with the retriever lying on the mat; the dim hall with its oak furniture, clusters of blue delft ware, and smell of polish; the solid little church at the foot of the hill, practically in the grounds, where tablets to commemorate Dares of the two past centuries hid the roughness of the chancel walls. It was three years since, with little regret, he had left it all, and only now in his isolation did he long for and regret it.

Also there was Georgie Dalison—the girl with

brown eyes and warmly-tinted skin, bright hair and little white teeth—who had come to live with her uncle and aunts, Sir Joshua and the Misses Bail, at Blew Park the year before he went out to India. She had been seventeen, he twenty-one with his mind set on his own immediate future; but there had been sufficient indication of a dawning love affair between the pair to cause ruthless intervention from the elder Miss Bail. And Stephen remembered with affectionate amusement the clandestine farewell that had taken place in the summer-house at Blew Park when Georgie had cried, and he had kissed her and begged her not to forget him. They had never attempted a correspondence, but Stephen had always kept her photograph on the mantelpiece (it was there now), and the remembrance of her had never been very far away from him.

Now he began to be actively haunted by the fear that she might be engaged to someone else or even married, and finally, in desperation, he had sent off an application for three months' privilege leave. It was due to him, for he had saved up his annual months' holiday with this view; but, as he had only lately been transferred, it was hardly to be expected that leave would be granted, and, indeed, he inwardly felt somewhat ashamed of asking for it under the official circumstances.

Last night the answer had come. Much to his surprise he was officially informed that he might take May, June, July; and this morning, as he walked on to the canal bank, he could have leaped and shouted for pleasure.

When he reached the aqueduct, he stood leaning on the massive stone parapet with the sluggish canal water moving silently behind him, and looked across at the ugly, squat canal bungalow that had been his home for the last five months. The white-washed walls and flat roof stood out in the strong sunlight as though they had been cut from cardboard and pasted on to the yellow background. He could see the cotton-clothed figures of his servants moving about between the veranda and the cook-house, and all around the buildings was dust, patches of parched grass, hard, glaring monotony—even the canal bank was here bare and treeless, for, to join the aqueduct, it was raised above the level of depression through which ran the river, and plantation on the heavy slopes was not permissible.

How he loathed the place! Could a man ask any girl to come to such a wilderness? Yet the idea of returning to it alone when his leave was over made him shudder. He put the thought resolutely from him. He would trust to luck that his services would be required elsewhere on his return, or that the fellow who took his place might be 'one of those asses' who preferred solitude, and so would apply to remain there.

He looked at his watch. The Executive Engineer, his immediate superior officer, was due this morning to inspect the sub-division, and he meant to ride some miles up the bank to meet him. But it was still rather early to proceed, and he walked down the steep incline of the embankment from the aqueduct to the riverside to examine the

massive piers and archways with professional attention.

The river was very low, hardly more than a shallow stream, that eddied round the stone supports with a gentle sucking sound. The waters of the Kali Nadi, namesake of the great goddess of destruction, looked harmless and benevolent shining placidly in the sun, flowing with lazy contentment through the dry land. And yet in the scattered villages along its course there were old people who remembered hearing their fathers speak of a time when the innocent-looking stream had risen and swept away houses, trees, cattle, people for miles; had mounted high over the level of the valley in a tearing, raging flood. This was long previous to any thought of canal or aqueduct, and the only work of human hands that had successfully withstood the overpowering torrent of water was the old native bridge further down the river, built by a pious merchant in early Moghul days, and whose wide piers and low, pointed archways had been harmlessly swept by the floods of centuries.

But now as Dare stood by her side the River of Destruction sang softly, and smiled up into his face. A silver cloud of small birds flew out from the bank and shimmered over the surface; a kingfisher made a gorgeous arrow of colour as it swooped down into a shallow corner; the cool splashing of an energetic bather sounded from the other side of the aqueduct.

He turned to reclimb the slope, and on the summit was met by the salaaming figure of an elderly native attired in vivid yellow glazed calico

with a red cloth belt and a brass badge, the uniform somewhat unwisely selected by the Irrigation Department for their canal watchmen—for its exceeding brilliance often acted as a convenient danger-signal to the unscrupulous villager when engaged in stealing more than his share of water from the distributary for his crops.

The private dwelling-place of Sham Lal, the Nandi watchman, was situated in the village less than half a mile from the aqueduct, but his official residence was an outhouse in the compound of the canal bungalow, which he only occupied during the absence of the officer in charge, when his duty was to guard the premises at night. Also he was expected to see that no cultivator took water from the local distributary out of his regular turn, and for that reason the appointment of watchman on a canal is one that is highly valued by the Oriental understanding.

Sham Lal's pay was not much more than the earnings of an ordinary coolie; but he had purchased a profitable piece of land, was able to lend money in the village at exorbitant interest, married his children with much display and expenditure, and had even adopted various high-caste customs to which he was by no means strictly entitled.

To-day his usually placid countenance looked disturbed and aggrieved.

'Your Highness, I have a petition,' he began querulously: 'two days' absence from work is required by this poor slave.'

'Why?' inquired Dare.

'Ill-luck hath befallen me—my half-brother's daughter, who was married in childhood to one Ram Singh, farmer, in the next village, hath become a widow.'

Dare checked a smile. The ill-luck would appear to have befallen the widow rather than Sham Lal. He lingered to hear details of the catastrophe, having the time to spare, and seeing that the watchman evidently desired to explain matters.

'Her parents having died of the cholera when she was but an infant, I took her into my house and treated her as mine own offspring, and next week she, being now grown to womanhood, was to have gone to her husband's house, and we had prepared a feast and rejoicings. Now is Ram Singh dead, poisoned may be by some enemy of mine—who knows? And there is much business to settle, and, alas! money to be paid. Who will make up to me, a poor man, for the marriage expenses of fourteen years back, and for the preparations already made for the second ceremony? Who is to compensate me for the burden and disgrace of a widow living beneath my roof? Her mother was a woman of the North, whose parents came down-country to seek work and food, driven from their own land by the famine; and they were worthless people, knowing neither law nor order. This girl herself was ever a trouble and vexation since she could walk. Now is she a widow also. Wah!'

Respect for the sahib's presence restrained Sham Lal from spitting in vehement disgust upon the ground.

'Poor little devil! what a poisonous time she will have!' thought Dare. 'You can take the leave,' he added to Sham Lal; 'but not until Renny Sahib has gone. There are his carts coming in.' He pointed to some heavily-laden vehicles slowly progressing down the canal bank. 'You must see that his tents are pitched on the shady side of the compound, and if he wants to use the bungalow there are two rooms empty.'

Sham Lal grinned.

'The sahib will need much accommodation,' he said, 'since I have heard that this time he brings with him the memsahib and the children, and the memsahib's mother and two sisters.'

'Heavens!' cried Dare. A few days ago he might have welcomed this threatened invasion of women and children as a blessed break in the monotony of his life, but now that he was going home the prospect of their arrival only dismayed him. He must be civil to the relations of his 'boss'; he would feel bound to offer the use of his one sitting-room to the ladies; he would probably be expected to join them at dinner. It was a nuisance.

Before he mounted his pony Stephen waited to allow the line of creaking, lumbering carts to pass. Tin buckets hung rattling at their sides, goats followed bleating, fowls protested from a wicker crate balanced on a child's cot. There were tin boxes, camel-trunks, zinc baths, beds, tables, chairs, and a straggling procession of servants with a few sheep, a large gray buffalo, and a couple of horses. Dare watched it all pass by, and for a moment he felt

thankful he was unmarried. Then quickly remembering the photograph on the mantelpiece he changed his mind, for he felt sure that Georgie Dalison would never insist on dragging a crowd of her female relations about with her in camp.

He rode along, whistling, and making mental plans for his leave, of which he intended to enjoy every hour. Even the hot journey down-country would be more than bearable when each moment would be taking him nearer to the sea and the ship that was to carry him to England. He supposed his uncle would allow him to make his headquarters at Daresfield, where he would now feel so delightfully independent of the old man's severe rule. He must write next mail and say he was coming. And when he was in London he would give his mother and her second family all the pleasure he could afford. Thanks to his five months at Nandi, where it was impossible to spend money, he had a very good balance at his bank. He pictured the run up from Dover through the rich land so green and fresh with early summer. How glorious the country would be looking! He rehearsed his meeting with Georgie Dalison—how she would look, what she would say. Then he thought of fried soles, English bread and butter, home-cured hams, and hosts of foolish details.

A little cloud of dust in the distance brought him back to his present surroundings. Evidently Mr. Renny was at hand, and Dare urged the white pony into a canter. He was relieved a few minutes later to find that, so far, his Executive Engineer was alone

—a short, spare man, with thin features and tired eyes, who looked ten years older than his actual age, and had disappointment stamped on every line of his small, weary face.

'My party will come on later,' he explained presently, as the two men rode along at a walk side by side. 'They don't like marching early, my wife finds it overtires the children. She and my mother-in-law go with them in the bullock-shigram, and the girls use the trap.'

Dare made polite replies, and regarded his companion with secret pity. Then they plunged into professional talk which lasted till they reached the aqueduct, where they halted and got off their horses. Mr. Renny's face brightened, and with an interest that approached animation he examined the arches, the channel, the parapets, the roadway, the embankment, and then stood gazing up the river, his eyes shaded with his hand.

'Some day,' he said slowly, 'that valley which only looks like a wide shallow trough, will fill to the brim and overflow. It has far more capacity than you would think to look at it. I said so when they were going to build this thing,' tapping the masonry with his whip, 'and I objected to the size of the aqueduct; I thought the waterway insufficient. But as I was only a "griff," not long out from home, naturally nobody paid any attention to my opinion. It was, of course, infernal cheek my having one at all! Since then I have learnt that in Government service it isn't always wise to say what you think if you don't happen to agree with your superiors.

When the truth entails the spending of extra money the authorities prefer to be deceived.'

He laughed with pathetic bitterness. The man was an exceptionally able engineer, but he was perhaps too honest, and certainly too tactless ever to gain the recognition he deserved. He had never put himself forward except to disagree, he had never asked for anything at the right moment, he had allowed other men to take credit that should have been his, and had protested when it was too late. Finally, he had married a girl of no social standing, the daughter of a railway subordinate, who had been born and bred in India—a country where the patriarchial instinct is strong—and he had found himself saddled indefinitely with his wife's relations. This undesirable marriage may not have hindered him officially, but it hardly tended to his advantage, and his promotion had been slow, his career practically a failure, and what ambition he had ever possessed had long since become mere querulous discontent.

'But surely,' said Dare, in respectful doubt, 'the aqueduct should be equal to any reasonable flood, and there can't be anything very tremendous—the river isn't more than fifty feet wide for the greater part of the year, and as often as not doesn't even flood the valley once during the monsoon.'

'Most things in India are unreasonable,' said Mr. Renny drearily. 'You must remember that local statistics aren't available for a sufficiently long period to give any absolute certainty as to the maximum rainfall in any one week.' The little man turned and laid a thin, restless hand on his assistant's arm.

'Now just suppose,' he said earnestly, 'that in the topmost reach of the river ten inches of rain fell in one day, and that by the time the flood so produced had got halfway down, a similar rainfall occurred on the portion of the catchment basin just above the aqueduct—wouldn't the intensity of the flood through the waterway be simply colossal? It mayn't happen in my time or even in yours, but it will some day, and then all this is bound to go. The river wasn't christened the Kali Nadi for nothing—the natives know what she can do—and Government will have to spend fifty lakhs of rupees in building a new aqueduct on a very different scale. But when it does happen I don't suppose anyone will remember that Joe Renny told them many years ago how it would be.'

CHAPTER II

MRS. RENNY'S two sisters, the Misses Larken, drove up with a flourish to the front of the canal bungalow in their brother-in-law's dogcart, and beheld, standing in the veranda, a young man with broad shoulders and curiously fair hair, that seemed by contrast to deepen the hue of his tanned skin and emphasize the blue of his eyes. This welcome vision, which they pretended not to see, caused the two young ladies to exchange delighted glances and to begin an animated, self-conscious argument one with another.

'Now, take care! Don't put the reins down till I am safe out of the trap. Where is that syce?'

'Oh, you silly! This old horse will never move unless he is flogged, you know that. Do get out quick—don't wait for the syce!'

'Now, now don't hurry me, or I shall fall on my nose!'

Exaggerated peals of laughter followed.

'Allow me.'

Stephen stepped forward, and was greeted with two little shrieks of simulated surprise. He held out his hand, and with its help the sisters descended heavily to the ground.

They were what is usually known as 'well-grown' girls, with large frames solidly covered. They had high cheek-bones and uncertain noses, coarse fringes of dark hair hid their foreheads, and their ages might have been anything between twenty and thirty. One was dressed in pink and the other in blue, and they wore broad pith sun-hats elaborately trimmed with white muslin.

'Oh, how kind you are! Thank you, most awfully,' said the pink Miss Larken, while the blue one threw herself into a veranda chair as though exhausted. 'My! Just look at Sue! She is quite tired with all the sun and dust and the long, long way.'

'I would much rather stay at Pari than come into camp,' grumbled Sue—Pari being the little civil station thirty miles away, which was the divisional headquarters—'though the people there are very mixed. Loo does not mind that—she would be friends with anyone.'

'And why not?' demanded Loo. 'All the same, I shall be very glad when the cold weather is over and we go up-hill. We are going to have a season at Mussoorie with an aunt. My sister and Mr. Renny mean to stay down at Pari, and my mother too. I do not envy them. Shall you be going up-hill this summer? If so, do come to Mussoorie. It is such a gay place.'

'I am going home for my leave,' said Dare, 'and all my plans are hopelessly fixed now.'

His tone implied that, had he only met the Miss Larkens earlier, his leave would have been spent at Mussoorie and nowhere else.

'Oh, home!' echoed Sue from the depths of the wicker chair. 'That would be too much bother for *me!* Fancy taking a passage and travelling all those miles down-country in the heat, and the packing, and the voyage, and the rough sea! Oh, no, no!'

'You are such a lazy,' observed her sister with contempt.

Sue Larken turned confidentially to Stephen.

'It is better to be slow than fast,' she said, with spite. 'Up in Mussoorie they call her "Unlimited Loo." Besides, she is just as lazy as me, sometimes. What do you think she did the other day? We were just going out when she saw a big hole in one of her stockings, and, instead of stopping to change, she inked her skin.'

'Well,' said Loo, quite unabashed, 'the ink washed off, and I mended the hole next day. Look!'

She thrust forth a large foot encased in an embroidered stocking that was neatly darned on the instep. Dare gazed at it with open admiration suitable to the occasion, and inquired how she contrived to walk in such ridiculous little shoes. Loo protested that they were in reality far too large for her, and proceeded to kick one of them off in proof of her statement. The shoe was fielded by Stephen, who refused to return it, and chaffing personalities followed freely. A romp seemed imminent, and the girls were thoroughly enjoying themselves, when the bullock-shigram, a hooded vehicle which looked like an army ambulance, lumbered up, and from it

emerged a depressing little crowd. A thin, sallow woman, who bore a ghostly likeness to her two full-blooded sisters; a stout, serene old lady in a red bonnet; five unwashed-looking children, a couple of draggled ayahs, and bundles innumerable.

Dare stifled his disgust, introduced himself to Mrs. Renny, and offered her the use of the sitting-room, which she accepted inertly and without gratitude. Then he took refuge in his bedroom, and ordered a small tent to be pitched outside, wherein he might peacefully do his work and have his meals.

Mr. Renny had previously retired to his office-tent erected some distance from the bungalow, and the various members of his establishment speedily converted the house and compound into something little short of pandemonium. The children shrieked together and in turns. Mrs. Renny and old Mrs. Larken scolded in shrill nasal voices, while the girls played their portable harmonium and practised duets and solos. The buffalo, the goats, the horses, the sheep, were marshalled up to the steps of the veranda to be fed under the suspicious eyes of the memsahib. The washing of the family was hung out to dry in the most public part of the compound. Their servants scurried ceaselessly in every direction, and borrowed plates, knives, groceries, table-linen, and furniture from Dare's indignant old bearer.

The racket continued without cessation till late in the afternoon, when a stilted note arrived from Mrs. Renny, inviting Mr. Dare to take tea with her in his own sitting-room, and, half amused, half

exasperated, he went. He was surprised, when he entered, to see his subordinate, Mr. Green, seated at the table in an attitude of affable politeness. It appeared that he had met Miss Sue Larken last cold weather at Cawnpore, so had now ventured to call, and had been invited to remain to tea. Mr. Renny was still hard at work in his tent, but the girls greeted Dare as an old friend, and Mrs. Renny hospitably pressed him to partake of boiled eggs.

'They are laid by my own fowls; they are not bazaar eggs,' she said, somewhat inclined to be offended when her guest refused. She offered him jam which she had made herself, sardines, cold pudding, and even cheese.

Old Mrs. Larken stared him out of countenance with an expression of kindly interest and curiosity, but she spoke little, save to admonish an ayah, or call one of the children, who seemed to swarm all over the floor. Only once did she voluntarily address him.

'Such a lot of little ones—h'n?' she remarked with pride.

Dare glanced ruefully at his smart drugget, already spotted with milk and food; at the chairs, which bore traces of sticky fingers; at his writing-table, littered with plates, jugs, and feeding-bottles.

'Yes,' he said without enthusiasm; 'their name is legion!'

'Oh noh,' corrected the old lady, looking puzzled; 'it is Renny.'

'We have been examining all your photos and things,' announced Loo Larken, walking to the

mantelpiece when tea was over. 'Now, do come and tell me all about these people.'

The rest of the party settled down to a round game at the other end of the room, and Stephen joined Miss Larken, prepared to be entertained by her society. She was lively, though vulgar; her manner had a frank animation that was not unpleasant, and her brown eyes were bright and friendly.

'Who is the pretty girl, to begin with?' She pointed to a framed photograph. 'She is wearing a pearl necklace—is it a real one?'

'I never inquired. She is a Miss Dalison, who lives near my uncle's place in England. Do you call her pretty? Don't you think beauty of a more pronounced type——'

He gazed with audacious meaning at Miss Loo, and mentally wondered what was possessing him to 'play the ass.'

'Oh my, you cheeky man!' cried the girl, fitting on the cap with ready triumph. 'Then who is this,' she continued—'an old clergyman with a cross face?'

'That is my uncle, Mr. Dare. His step-brother was my father, and when my mother was left a widow, just after I was born, he gave us a home.'

'Had your father no money, then?'

'Not when he died.'

'How did he lose it? Racing? Playing cards?'

'I don't know,' said Stephen shortly, which was literally true.

'Well, it was good of Mr. Dare to help you and

your mother. Is he a nice old man? He doesn't look it.'

'I don't fancy you would care for him,' replied Stephen, with a smile, as he thought of his uncle's severe manner, and the familiar bearing of 'Unlimited Loo.' 'He is rather an eccentric old person. Some people would call him religious mad, I suppose.'

'Oh yes. I hate people like that. Always thinking of hell and the devil, and giving one fits about one's soul, and sticking in church for hours and hours—eh?'

'Something like that. He is extremely Low Church, and so bigoted that anything approaching to ritualism simply infuriates him. He's a hard, narrow-minded old man, and, by Jove! how I used to hate him, though I ought not to have done so, considering that he educated me, and started me in the world.'

He laughed, remembering his youthful rebellion against his uncle's rules.

Most of this speech had been incomprehensible to Loo, who poked assiduously amongst the ornaments and pictures on the broad mantelpiece, and resumed her catechism.

'Who is this little lady in black? She looks very tired.'

'That is my mother—Mrs. de Vitre.'

'Mrs. de Vitre?'

'Yes; she married again when I was about twelve years old, and my uncle has never forgiven her. They haven't met since. My step-father is an artist and a Roman Catholic, and such a combination was

too much for the uncle. The four children in that group are my step-brothers and sisters.'

'Then you did not live with your mother when she married again?'

'No; I had no choice in the matter,' he said, with reserve.

'What was your home like?' She pronounced it 'hawme,' with the accent of the country. 'Have you a picture of it to show me?'

Stephen reflected for a moment.

'Yes; I think there is one in here.'

He dragged a battered album from the bookcase, and turned over the leaves till he came to the photograph of a fine old house of the West Country type with gables and side wings, and a terrace with stone alcoves. The picture included a glimpse of a formal Dutch garden, and a sweep of lawn dotted with large trees—lime, beech, chestnut.

'That is a very nice bungalow,' said Miss Larken, with somewhat awed approval; 'but I thought the padres in England were all poor, and lived in small houses.'

'This is not the rectory. It's Daresfield House, and belongs to my uncle. It has been in our family for generations.'

'Oh my! Will it be yours, then, when he dies?'

Stephen heard the question but forgot to answer. Instead he gazed absently at the commonplace, good-natured face of his companion, his thoughts far distant.

Until lately he had never much regretted that Daresfield was not for him in the future, for he had

been brought up in the knowledge that he would have to mould his own prospects, and he had been glad to go out into the world master of his fate, free from the narrow, subdued atmosphere of the place, and his uncle's iron tyranny. But Nandi and solitude had made him look back and remember the familiar fields and woods, the quiet old house with its air of shabby remoteness and patient decay, the associations that every room, every acre held for him. A dull vexation had begun to assail him that the place must eventually pass out of his life, and now this feeling had suddenly been jerked into active resentment by Loo Larken's idle question. He was a Dare, his people had been at Daresfield for two centuries; he was his uncle's next of kin; it was unjust that the inheritance should be denied him because a vindictive old man could neither forgive nor forget the shortcomings of the living and the dead. He wondered if there was anything he could do to influence his uncle when he got home. . . .

'I believe you are deaf,' he heard Miss Larken say impatiently; and she made a trumpet with her hands and shouted at him.

He controlled his thoughts with an effort.

'No; I am not deaf. I was only thinking how nice you looked. What did you ask me?'

'Oh you ninny! Don't look at me then if you can't hear and see at the same time. I said Would your horrid old uncle leave you his house and compound when he died?'

'No; he will leave me nothing,' he answered curtly.

'Isn't he rich?'

'I haven't an idea. Anyway, he always says he has no money.'

'Like Mr. Renny,' observed Loo with ingratitude. 'I do hate a stingy man! If ever I can persuade myself to marry, my husband must give me all I want and never grumble.'

'Of course,' said Dare gallantly.

Then, weary of the perpetual banter, he suggested a walk, which should include the card party, before it grew dark.

They sallied forth, Stephen leading the way with Loo—he could not escape from her—Sue and Mr. Green just behind; Mrs. Renny and her mother deep in an argument about the under-ayah, and the children, guarded by a long-suffering peon, followed in a straggling group.

Dare wondered what conversation could be like between Sue and Mr. Green, and he listened from sheer curiosity.

'I hope there are no snakes about,' said Sue languidly; 'it is just warm enough for them to begin coming out.'

'I knew a monkey once,' remarked Mr. Green with deference, 'that used to catch snakes.'

'Oh my, Mr. Green! and what did he do with them?

'He held them by their necks, and rubbed their heads off on the hard ground.'

'My!' repeated Sue, without feeling or interest, and a dead silence followed.

The party trailed down the canal bank and crossed

the aqueduct, passing Mr. Green's two-roomed dwelling.

'So that is where you live?' said Sue, with an evident effort. She preferred silence to conversation. 'Don't you find it very lonely?'

'Not very lonely,' said Mr. Green reflectively, 'only rather lonely.'

Another and this time a permanent silence.

'Where are we going?' asked Loo, halting and looking about her. 'This is a very bad road, and my feet will get so dusty.'

'It will take us through the village,' said Stephen, 'which is rather a pretty little place and considerably cleaner than most of them.'

He indicated in the near distance a collection of huts with brown thatched roofs, showing against a dark green background of mango-trees.

'What! *walk* through the village. Why, what would the natives think?'

'It doesn't matter what they think,' said Stephen, with some impatience.

But the Larken ladies and Mr. Green were afflicted with the dread of native criticism which is innate in the country-bred. To them it was unseemly that a white woman should pass through a bazaar, however humble, on foot; indeed, it was scarcely becoming for her to be seen walking at all except in the seclusion of the compound, and nothing would induce any of them to go further. Stephen conveniently remembered that there were crops needing inspection on the further side of the village, and, raising his cap, he went on alone with a feeling

of relief, while his late companions, chattering and laughing, effected a laborious return to the bungalow.

He walked on with a sense of freedom, and thought with careless pity of the unfortunate Renny's situation and unsuccessful career. A man possessing brains and talent, who ought to have been near his Chief Engineership with a distinguished record behind him; but who, fatally laden with his own difficult temperament and an unpresentable wife and her relations, was at a hopeless standstill halfway up the ladder. Stephen recalled the little man's doleful prophecy as to the ultimate destruction of the aqueduct by flood; and he glanced keenly back at the solid, weighty structure with its massive piers and archways, its abutments, land walls, and river wings, standing upon months, if not years, of work hidden away under ground. Then he looked out over the river depression. Perhaps with an exceptionally heavy rainfall the water might rise high enough to damage, or even to destroy, some of the villages along its course; but, to overthrow the aqueduct, the Kali Nadi would have to swell into a river a mile broad, with a depth of possibly twenty-five feet! It seemed to him incredible that such a thing could ever happen.

He walked through the warm, dry dust till he reached the outlying rice-fields that in the rainy season would be a sheet of emerald green, though now they only resembled a dull gray map, traced out into little plots for the convenience of irrigation. The village beyond was smothered in a cloud of smoke from the cow-dung fires that had just been

lighted for the preparation of the evening meal, and a clatter of voices rose through the blue mist. Dare coughed as the pungent fumes entered his throat and nostrils, and for a moment he stood still, uncertain whether he would pass on through the choking atmosphere, or skirt round the mud-walls.

He was about to turn when a shrill cry from one of the nearest hovels made him pause, and a slight figure, with tinkling bangles and anklets, swirling petticoats, and tumbled black hair, ran from the dark patch of the open doorway, and collided violently against him. In close pursuit followed a well-known form, clothed in bright yellow glazed calico.

Sham Lal was panting and furious; he brandished a stick in his upraised hand, and a torrent of scolding words poured from his mouth.

'Pig that thou art!' he was shouting, 'may Kali destroy thee. Would that thou hadst never been born. Was ever man cursed with such an inmate of his house.'

The girl subsided in a heap at Dare's feet, and Sham Lal's violence was checked by finding himself confronted by his master. He at one salaamed respectfully.

'This evil one hath ever caused trouble and disturbance in the house,' he explained apologetically, 'and now does she desire to retain her ornaments and coloured clothing, and behave as though she were no widow but still a bride. She hath no shame.'

The culprit sobbed in the dust, but looked up fearlessly with bright dark eyes into the face of the

sahib. He saw that her slender limbs were finely modelled, her skin of a delicate golden brown, and her eyes deep and lustrous as those of an antelope. He pitied the pretty little thing sincerely. He had a vague notion of the miseries of Hindu widowhood, and it seemed to him deplorable that this helpless, graceful child who lay at his feet should be condemned to an existence of slavery and repression.

'Don't hurt her,' he said sharply, and put out his hand as though to shield the girl; 'she is young, and it is not her fault that she is a widow. Why should she be punished?'

'Sahib, if she will not obey the customs of her people she must be beaten. My womenkind bade her remove her jewellery and wear the white garments of widowhood, but she behaves as though possessed of an evil spirit, and neither will she take off her ornaments nor remove her coloured clothing. She says she will run away and become a Christian! Truly, this evil must have lain in her mind from the day that a mission padre-sahib came through the village a year ago and preached. It was then that Sunia, this worthless one, listened and also spoke with the padre, who gave her a black book, wherein was written in Hindi the magic of the English gods and devils. But that I burned the book we might all have been bewitched.'

He glared threateningly at the girl, and Sunia rose suddenly to her naked brown feet, shook the dust from her coloured skirt, and, drawing the folds of her wrapper partly across her face, moved close to Dare's side, as though to claim his protection.

'Look here, Sham Lal,' said the somewhat embarrassed young man, in his halting Hindustani, 'you mustn't ill-treat her. Take her home, and don't beat her any more. You ought to be ashamed to hurt a woman,' he concluded severely.

Sham Lal salaamed with an injured air.

'But what can a man do,' he grumbled, 'when the womenfolk will not obey?'

Dare turned to the silent figure at his side, and the triumphant expression in the shining eyes nearly made him laugh.

'You must do as you are bid, and cease giving so much trouble,' he said weakly.

'Very well, sahib,' she said in a clear, high voice, and greatly to Dare's relief she meekly followed Sham Lal back to the thatched hut that stood in the shadow of a plumy plantain-tree.

He waited a moment to watch, with some amusement, the reluctant progress of the couple; but when Sunia suddenly turned and began to walk backwards, staring at him with disconcerting intentness, he hastily continued his walk. On his return, half an hour later, he avoided the village, and took the longer route home.

Darkness had fallen, and the lamps were already lighted in the bungalow when he got back. Through the open door he could see the table laid with a combination of his own belongings and those of the Rennys, so that evidently he was expected to join his dinner with theirs — a pleasant departmental custom when the company was congenial, but Dare sighed resignedly at the present prospect. Loo

Larken came forward to meet him in a yellow blouse, that was crumpled with perpetual packing.

'How late you are!' she cried; 'and here is your dâk (post) waiting for you. The English mail has come—and what a lot of picture papers you get.' (She had opened them.) 'Why don't you take in the *Lady's Pictorial?* There is only one letter. I suppose it is from your mamma?'

She handed him a gray square envelope.

Much to her disappointment he put the letter in his pocket. She had hoped he would read it in her presence, and tell her all 'his mamma's' news. Only the severest self-control had prevented her from opening it with the papers—'by mistake.'

'I must just change,' he said, hurrying past her. 'I shan't be long; don't wait.'

Hardly was he in his room before a servant was sonorously chanting at the door that dinner was on the table, and so it was not until he went to bed that night after a noisy, untidy meal, a flirtatious card game with the girls, and a smoke with Mr. Renny, that Stephen was at liberty to open his mother's letter.

CHAPTER III

THERE are few places that present a more totally unattractive appearance than a small railway station in the country on a wet day. Stephen's mother shivered mentally and physically as she got out of the train this raw, spring afternoon, and her already depressed spirits sank lower still.

The well-remembered laurel-bushes and prim white palings that flanked the platforms dripped with water, a melancholy wind drove the rain into long, slanting needles. Glistening black mounds were formed by the tarpaulins over the trucks on the siding, and thin, monotonous streams of water trickled from them to the ground. The station dog sat and trembled, his back against the wall, and lamented that the season was over for waiting-room fires. Farmers and villagers returning from the neighbouring market-town collected in damp, subdued groups by the booking-office before starting homewards in gigs, carts, or on foot. Mrs. de Vitre recognised some of these people, but she had not the spirit or the inclination to challenge their memories. The little lady stood dejectedly resentful of her surroundings while the train rumbled slowly away, and her hand-bag was taken from her by a stolid boy-porter.

'Is there anything from Daresfield to meet this train?' she asked him doubtfully.

He stared at her, then nodded; and, relieved, she picked her way out after him to where a covered wagonette awaited her coming. She noted the shabby vehicle with a feeling of impatient recollection. Twelve years ago, distraught with mingled happiness and regret, she had driven in it away from Daresfield, and since that day she had never seen the place. She recognised the coachman who sat on the box, enveloped in a crumpled mackintosh cape.

'Well, Jackson,' she said, with a wistful smile, 'have you all forgotten me?'

The man responded heartily. The Daresfield servants had always liked 'Master Stephen's' mother, though perhaps a certain lack of deference had tempered their regard. Her gentle, diffident manner and anxiety to save them trouble had won their affection during the years she had spent at Daresfield, but hardly their entire respect.

She got into the mouldy carriage, and shivered again as they drove over the railway bridge, and her pulses began to beat nervously at the prospect of her arrival at Daresfield. Nothing short of a serious crisis in her life would have led her to beg for an interview with her brother-in-law after the years of angry silence that lay between them; but the fact that he had granted her request for a meeting, and had sent the carriage for her, gave her hope, and with this she did battle against the terror she felt of the approaching encounter. She was tired with the

journey, taken suddenly and in dire affliction of mind, and she dozed uncomfortably during the tedious drive up one hill and down another at the pace best suited to the old horse's wavering limbs. But all the time she was wearily conscious of the thick churning of wheels through mud, of the rain streaming down the windows and running off Jackson's cape that blocked the front pane, of glimpses of soaking fields and hedges, and a leaden sky crossed by slow, heavy flights of rooks.

The sharp crunch of wet gravel roused her, and the carriage drew up at the porch with a jerk that nearly shot her on to the opposite seat. The gray-haired man-servant who opened the door beamed benignly at her, looked surprised that she had brought no boxes, and said, as he helped her to take off her wraps in the hall, that the master was well and had gone over to the church, but that he ought to be back now at any moment. He curbed his longing to ask her questions (for the unexpectedness of her coming had thrown the servants' hall into a fever of curiosity), and opened the drawing-room door with smiles that were hospitable and patronizing, and a promise that tea should be ready at once. Then he hesitated.

'The master gave me no orders about your room, ma'am,' he said apologetically, 'but the housemaid has got your old one ready. We were only told this morning that the carriage would be wanted to fetch you from the station, and I expect he forgot to mention about the room.'

'Thank you; but I am not sure—perhaps I may

not stay,' she said tremulously; and as the door closed behind Hawkins the tears rushed to her eyes. The burden of grief in her heart weighed heavily, and she felt so cold, so lonely, so nervous.

She advanced into the long, lofty room, which was bare, cheerless, shabby, and which conveyed a depressing sense of non-occupation. Things stood as she had always remembered them. Mr. Dare had never permitted the least change or improvement. There were the woolwork banner-screens, the four bronze candlesticks on the mantelpiece, the marble tables against the walls with gilt mirrors and legs, the heavy, handsome ornaments under glass cases. No books, no flowers, no trivialities of any description, and the atmosphere felt musty and cold, in spite of the gay wood fire that attracted her to the grate. She spread her hands to the flames, and wished she had kept on her cloak, but she would not ring for it because Hawkins was busy with the tea, and she dared not fetch it herself in case she should encounter Mr. Dare in the hall. She wished to be prepared for their meeting.

'What weather!' she said, half aloud. And her eyes turned to the tall, narrow windows, through which she could see a sodden expanse of lawn and garden beyond the terrace, where rain-beaten primroses and daffodils made but a faint relief in the sunless prospect; where the huge trees, their outlines rounded with opening leaves, creaked and swayed in the wind, and shook the water in showers from their branches.

It was on a day precisely like this that she had

first seen Daresfield twenty-five years ago, when she and her husband, Stephen Dare, had arrived on their bridal visit; and, with the curious partiality of memory for trifles, the recollection came to her now of how she had stood at the window of her bedroom over the drawing-room, and speculated as to why bad weather seemed so much more depressing when the evenings were long and light, than when all without was dark, dead, and bare. Her husband had laughed, and said that whenever he came to Daresfield the weather was always infernal, and he should never have brought her to the God-forsaken old hole, only that he hoped, now he was respectably married, that he might induce his half-brother to pay his debts. She also remembered the characteristic haste with which he had insisted on departing when his persuasions in that direction proved futile.

Little more than a year later she had come back, a helpless, penniless widow, with Stephen a baby; and now, as she stood and gazed at the familiar outlook she thought of Stephen's childhood, his manliness and independence, even before he was in knickerbockers, his naughtiness and impatience over any sort of coddling, his hatred of being kept in the house. The two had loved each other fondly, but they had never been companions or comrades. The mother's natural shyness and reserve had stood between them mentally, and the boy's passion for being out of doors in all weathers had kept them much apart. His uncle had sent him to school unusually early on account of his unruliness, and in the holidays her timid nature and delicate constitu-

tion had precluded her from watching, or joining in, his pursuits. She knew, when she left him to become Charles de Vitre's wife, that the boy would not actively miss her presence, and though it had perhaps made things easier for her at the time, she had often since recalled it with a pang of regret.

The door opened, and she welcomed the tea-tray. There was hot buttered toast, a rare luxury at Daresfield, but the cook had actually remembered her weakness, and had supplied it much as she would have indulged a child with its favourite pudding on a special occasion. Hawkins wheeled a comfortable chair up to the fire and mutely invited her to take it.

'Mr. Stephen seems doing well, ma'am,' he remarked briskly; 'but we don't get much news of him nowadays.'

'I heard from him last week. He was very well, and would like to come home, but was afraid he could get no leave, as he has not been long in a new place.'

'Dear, dear! They did ought to give him a change now and again; but depend upon it, ma'am, they can't do without him. It's only to be hoped that they won't keep him out there till he gets black. I've heard that Indian gentlemen do come home that dark, and Mr. Stephen's skin was always so beautiful and fair.'

He allowed himself to be reassured on this point, and then drew her attention to the London paper, which he placed on a small table at her side.

'Thank you, Hawkins. Please let the master

know I have arrived when he comes in,' she said, and sank into the chair, put her toes on the fender, and poured out the tea with a faint sense of consolation.

She was a little, fair, faded woman with delicate features, and a skin so fine that it had creased and lost colour before its time. She had been exceedingly pretty as a young widow, and people wondered that she had submitted for so many years to practical imprisonment in a gloomy old house with an elderly and forbidding brother-in-law. It was well known that in the earlier days of her bereavement Sir Joshua Bail, of Blew Park, who was cousin to Mr. Dare on his mother's side, had been anxious to marry her; but apparently the somewhat unpleasing habits and unfortunate appearance of the wealthy old baronet, added to the hostile attitude of his two spinster daughters, had decided her to decline his proposal and endure the consequent displeasure of Mr. Dare.

When Stephen was nearly eleven years old a handsome artist spent one glorious summer painting in the neighbourhood. He was partly French; his income depended entirely on his profession; he owned no relatives that could be called influential, or even moderately well off; and he was an ardent Roman Catholic. To Mr. Dare he represented everything that was least desirable in existence; but to Mrs. Dare he was a prince, a perfect lover, a being for whom she would risk and sacrifice everything, and her love gave a new courage to her nervous nature. For a year she was secretly en-

gaged to Mr. de Vitre; then he began to make a success with his pictures. He wanted her; he could give her a simple home; she defied Mr. Dare, married the artist, and turned Roman Catholic.

But she had to give up Stephen. His uncle continued to educate the boy only on condition that the mother neither saw nor wrote to him, and the years went by in silence till Stephen's prospects in life were assured, and he was ready to take up his Indian career. Then, with his uncle's grudging consent, he visited the little home in Fulham, which impressed him as being full of paint-brushes, untidy children, old hats, and unnecessary discomfort, but which, nevertheless, was pervaded by a careless happiness that reassured him, and sent him out to India with an easy mind. He had been haunted by the fear that his mother might be living in comparative poverty, with an uncertain future before her; but it seemed that de Vitre's pictures sold well, and, though the money was spent as fast as it was made, his prices were rising, and there was evidently little cause for anxiety concerning the future.

Now Mrs. de Vitre sat by the fire in the Daresfield drawing-room, her eyes fixed on the busy flames, listening intently through her thoughts for the sound of footsteps and the opening of a door. When she heard them she sat erect, white and nervous. Edward Dare had come home; in a few minutes at the utmost she must face him, and, metaphorically speaking, grovel at his feet.

While she waited a pale gleam of watery sunlight

passed through the window-panes, alighted on a worn patch of the threadbare carpet, and mocked the faded damask of the curtains. Also to the woman by the fireplace it made old Mr. Dare, as he walked in, look yellower, more forbidding, more unsympathetic than ever.

CHAPTER IV

THE Rev. Edward Dare had a calm, expressionless face that looked as if it had been moulded in papier-mâché. His bald head was high and narrow, and gray side-whiskers straggled down on to his clerical coat. He had the appearance of a man whose human tendencies had been arrested early in life, and certainly the first volume of his history contained chapters of galling disappointment.

He had been the only child of his father's marriage with one of the Bails of Blew Park, a family whose feminine members were renowned for strictness of morals and homeliness of aspect. This lady had carefully fostered her son's naturally pedantic instincts, and encouraged his precocious resolve to enter the Church, till, at sixteen, the boy was a finished prig, who regarded his sport-loving father as a deplorable example of earthliness, paraded opinions and ideas that were anti-ritualistic, and affected a horror of the Church of Rome, which in after years became a real and fanatical enmity.

When Edward arrived at this odious state of his existence his mother fell ill, and died in the comfortable certainty that her place in heaven was ready for her. And a year later, to her son's unspeakable

disgust, Mr. Dare married a lively young lady whose people lived in London, and who delighted to dance, sing, ride, spend money, and enjoy herself, and who was not at all particular about going to church. She filled Daresfield with her frivolous friends, and poor Edward's pious soul with wrath, and to complete the objectionableness of her conduct she gave him a step-brother, who subsequently proved to have inherited the careless generosity of his father's disposition, and his mother's love of ease and pleasure.

Little Stephen was, from the first, an object of dislike and resentment to the tall, pale youth with the gloomy, jealous nature, who stalked about among his step-mother's guests in silent disapprobation. And as the years went on circumstances nurtured the hostile feeling into almost active hatred. Every time Edward came home from Oxford the child seemed to be of more importance and himself of less account. The parents idolized the boy; the servants were his slaves; money, which Edward considered was needed for the estate, was lavished on his pleasures and caprices. No one seemed the least interested in the doings or intentions of the eldest son, who conducted his University career with credit and caution, eventually took orders, appropriated the family living, and settled down at Daresfield, where he firmly and quietly began to assert himself.

He gradually drew the management of the property from the incapable grasp of his father, who would have agreed to anything to save himself trouble, and had always been secretly afraid of the son who so disturbingly resembled the first Mrs.

Dare. Edward ignored his step-mother's open dislike, and petty but spiteful efforts to thwart and annoy him, also little Stephen's defiance and ridicule in which the mother supported and encouraged her child. But though the young clergyman endured the perpetual irritation and discord with apparent indifference, it secretly embittered and enraged him, and a vindictive resolution took root in his narrow mind that his step-brother Stephen should never, whatever happened, be master of Daresfield. Whether he married and had children or not, Edward could do as he pleased with the property, for the entail ceased with his own existence, and when old Squire Dare was killed by a fall from his horse soon after Stephen had gone to Eton, Mrs. Dare was politely informed that Daresfield was no longer her home.

'With your jointure, and your own fortune, you will be able to provide for Stephen and live in comfort if not luxury, and of course I shall always be pleased to see you both here on an occasional visit,' Edward had told her, unmoved by her tearful and violent assertions that her husband had always intended to make a suitable provision for his younger son. He quietly explained that this had been out of his father's power unless the money could have been saved from the yearly income. 'Which,' he reminded her, 'was of course impossible with such an extravagant household to keep up.' He added that, after a proper interval had elapsed, he intended to marry.

'Then I wish her joy of you, whoever the unfor-

tunate girl may be!' cried Mrs. Dare, finding comfort in recrimination. 'I don't believe any woman could stand such a cold-blooded horror, and I sincerely hope she'll make your life a burden, and then run away from you.'

And, to Mrs. Dare's extreme satisfaction, she lived to see her uncharitable desires fulfilled; for, in spite of a deliberate and seemingly judicious selection, Edward contracted a very unhappy marriage, and five years later his wife left him under scandalous circumstances.

'Now I shall die happy,' said his step-mother, who was very ill at the time; 'but keep friends with him, Stephen, and go there whenever he asks you. He has no children, remember, and let us trust that trouble may soften his disposition, and make him leave Daresfield to you after all.'

So Stephen's mother departed this life, and her son, who had not yet entered a profession, though he was over twenty, proceeded to enjoy the income she left him, and presently to spend the capital. He died at the age of twenty-six, drowned in debt, not long after his rash marriage with the pretty daughter of an Anglo-Indian official, whose death had left the girl alone in the world with nothing beyond her Government pension, which ceased with her marriage.

Then Edward Dare, from motives of duty and charity (and also perhaps because his brother's death gave him a certain grim satisfaction) paid Stephen's debts, and allowed the bewildered young widow to make her home at Daresfield, though on the distinct

understanding that her son was to have no hope or expectation of succeeding to the property. He informed her that the money he might have left his nephew had paid the father's debts, and that on his own decease the place would be sold, and the proceeds devoted to a charity.

Mrs. Dare had always feared the coldly-austere, intolerant Churchman on whom for so many years she had been helplessly dependent; and now, as she rose from her chair, her knees trembled beneath her, and she drew closer to the fire as though for protection from the calm, judicial manner that the years had not softened.

He stood before her without a smile or a word, and did not offer her his hand. She thought he looked very old and very hard.

'Thank you so much for letting me come, Edward,' she began hurriedly. 'I felt I must see you and tell you something that has happened.'

'Surely a letter——'

Mr. Dare raised his untidy gray eyebrows interrogatively.

'I couldn't explain in a letter,' said his sister-in-law desperately. 'Will you come and sit here by the fire and listen to me now, or would you rather wait till after dinner? Or, if you prefer it, I will come into the library with you. I remember that you don't like being in this room——'

She smiled unnaturally.

He looked at her with some attention and a faint surprise. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips were trembling almost beyond control.

'The library, I think, would be more appropriate,' he said.

It was in the library that he dealt with the misdemeanants of the village, reprimanded the servants, wrote curt refusals to undeserving appeals for charity, and composed his trite, passionless sermons. He held the drawing-room door open for her, and they crossed the hall together in silence, then passed through massive double doors (between which, she remembered, Stephen had delighted to shut himself when a little boy) and entered the sombre library with its heavy, leather-covered furniture, and giant bookcases. The fire had gone out, but they seated themselves on either side of the cavernous grate, and Mr. Dare's conical head and pallid face showed up strongly against the dark background of his chair. Behind him, in a cage on a stand, the vicious old parrot that had been part of the Daresfield establishment long before the advent of Stephen and his mother, sat huddled up cross and cold, and eyed them with silent, vindictive attention.

Mr. Dare crossed his legs and put the tips of his fingers together. His sister-in-law suddenly felt that she had never hated him more, and the sensation gave her a false temerity.

'I have come to ask you to help me,' she said boldly.

Then she waited, and held her breath, her courage dwindling, as she watched a dull red colour creep up the old man's cheeks, his eyes sink into his head and glitter like little points of jet.

'—— and your husband?' he added quietly, as though completing her sentence.

'We are in dreadful trouble,' she went on, her voice shaking. 'He was making a very fair income by his pictures—his success was coming at last—you have done a great deal for me and Stephen, and I must have seemed wickedly ungrateful when I married him—but I loved him so dearly—how could I have given him up?'

Mr. Dare moved his long, thin hand.

'Dispense with sentiment, if you please,' he said, 'and come to the point.'

The parrot shook himself and uttered a piercing scream. Mr. Dare rang the bell, and paused in unperturbed silence till Hawkins came in and carried bird and cage from the room. To Mrs. de Vitre the interruption was maddening.

'I would never have come to you, I would never have asked for help from anybody, only—only—' the tears rushed to her eyes—'my dear husband has lost his sight—he has gone blind—suddenly.'

There was a deadly silence. Mr. Dare's face was devoid of expression, and his sister-in-law lost her self-control.

'Now that you know what bitter trouble I am in, perhaps you can forgive—surely you will forgive—and help me? There has been an operation, but it was not successful, and they say he will never see again. None of the children are old enough to go out into the world and work—I cannot leave my husband to go and work myself—his illness has taken all the money we had, and there are bills, too, that will have to be paid; there is nothing coming in; what are we to do?' She left her chair and

stood before him quivering. 'Edward, apart from all that, I would gladly give my own sight now if I could restore his; but what is the use of trying to express what he is to me? I can only entreat you, of your charity, to have pity and help us. That is why I have come to you—*to beg*'—she held out her shaking hands; 'but who else had I to go to except you or Stephen? My husband's people are too poor themselves; I am practically without relatives, there is only Stephen. And if Stephen has to help us, it will cripple him for years—he is so young—it would be cruel; but there are the children to think of—the children—and that poor blind creature who will never see the light, or the sky, or the colours he loved again!' Her voice had risen hysterically, but she steadied it with an effort and went on in a lower key. 'I thought perhaps you would have let us have a cottage on the estate, and get the children into institutions, and then if Stephen sent us a little, and if you could spare us a little—you would never feel it. Oh! my husband would never have let me do this if he had known; but I have no pride left, and I *dare* not face the future with nothing. I can't—I daren't; and the doctor is not paid yet nor all the bills; and a blind man—a blind man——'

She broke into despairing sobs.

Mr. Dare placed his hands on the arms of his chair and drew himself to his feet. He crossed the room to the large, square writing-table and sat down in front of it, examined a quill pen, unlocked the right hand top drawer, and took out a cheque-book. For a moment he wrote, then handed her a cheque

for twenty-five pounds. She looked from the piece of paper to his face, and saw that he was livid with suppressed anger.

You will, no doubt, be anxious to get back to your husband as soon as possible,' he said, with forced calm. 'There is a train for London at eight o'clock, and the carriage will take you to the station.' He paused, and his bony fingers closed with violence over a paper-weight that lay on the table. She thought for a moment that he was going to strike her with it. 'I paid your first husband's debts,' he added, in a stifled voice, 'because he was my brother; I gave you shelter because you were my brother's widow; I started your son in life because he was my nephew. You forfeited your claim on me when you chose to marry a beggarly heretic, and you must take the consequences. That cheque will keep you and your family from want until you have communicated with Stephen, who will, no doubt, do all that is necessary; but further help from me you will not get.'

She stood speechless, appalled by the venom in his voice and countenance. Then she turned and blindly left the room, holding the cheque in her hand.

'I must ask Stephen—I must write to Stephen,' she kept repeating mechanically as she closed the heavy double doors.

She felt faint and giddy; her mind was in confusion; she only knew that she was ready to sacrifice anything, anybody, to protect her children and the man she loved from want.

She wrote a letter to Stephen by the next mail, telling him of her husband's sudden affliction, of old Mr. Dare's behaviour, of the accumulation of bills that must be paid, of her terror concerning the future. And the letter was the one in the gray envelope which was handed to him by Loo Larken that evening at Nandi, and which had lain in his pocket unopened till he went to bed at midnight.

CHAPTER V

STEPHEN lay awake far into the night, listening to the distant barking of village dogs, the spasmodic clamour of the jackals as they hunted over the plains, and the irritating cry of the brain-fever bird, that heralded the tribulations of the hot weather.

The young man lay and stared into the warm darkness, aching with a dumb sense of disappointment, trying to make himself understand that his leave must be given up, that the coming hot, lonely months would have to be faced and endured. That for him, after all, there was no escape from Nandi.

Every penny he had saved must, of course, be sent to relieve his mother's present difficulty and distress, and all he could spare for her in the future she should have. There was no question in his mind as to any other course of action, and he felt towards her no sort of reproach or resentment. Events had been against her; she would not have sought his help except under dire necessity, and he was thankful to be in a position to make things easy for her. Even he tried to persuade himself that he was glad to be at Nandi, where living was so cheap, and inevitable expenditure so small; had he been in or near a station his pay would have

done little more than keep him, whereas here he could have the ordinary requirements of life and yet be able to send sufficient money to his mother and her blind husband as would support them and the children in comparative comfort.

Only it meant that he must remain at Nandi indefinitely, and this, at least, would not be difficult to arrange, seeing that the authorities were more than satisfied when they had an officer in charge who was willing to stay there. It meant no leave, no luxuries, no pleasure, no lasting relief from the weary monotony of isolation for perhaps years to come. For a moment he looked into the future with an almost physical sensation of sickness. Then, with the shrinking of youth from the contemplation of disagreeable facts, he tried to shut the prospect from his mind. At any rate, there would be plenty of good shooting in the cold weather; he would see other men sometimes, Renny would be inspecting the subdivision occasionally, the superintending engineer would pay flying visits at intervals, the chief would come once a year. He argued that if other fellows of the department endured years of this sort of existence he had no right to grumble; that it was only because he had hitherto been lucky that he now so dreaded a bad time.

But then in a demon procession came sharp previsions of the fierce, hot weather, the scorching west wind, and stinging clouds of dust enveloping the silent bungalow and bare compound; the massive, unchanging aqueduct glaring in the sun, the mosquitos, and the stifling rainy season. There

must be days, weeks, months of all this in solitude.

He shuddered, and turned over in his bed, determined to sleep and to forget; and at last, towards morning, he dreamed that he was in England, carrying out his programme, enjoying every moment of his time.

* * * * *

'Mr. Dare! Mr. Dare! come out in the veranda and have some tea.'

The piercing voice of Loo Larken roused him from his paradise, and he remembered, as he shouted a spiritless reply, that to-day the Renny party were moving on. He recalled his annoyance at their coming, and recognised how glad he would now be if they were going to stay.

'My! how tired you look,' said Miss Larken, when he came out and found her seated in the veranda before a tea-tray, eating thick slabs of toast spread with very white butter made from the buffalo's milk. 'Didn't you sleep? The others aren't out of bed yet, except my brother-in-law, who has gone to take a fond farewell of the aqueduct. I kept on waking up all night and thinking what a pity it was we were going to-day.'

She threw him an affectionate glance; she was powerfully attracted by the handsome young engineer. But Stephen only looked gloomy, and Loo was obliged to pacify her vanity by assuming that his low spirits were due to her impending departure. So she became motherly and considerate in her manner, poured out his tea, put in the sugar with

her fingers, and drew his attention to the fact, buttered his toast, and went as near to actually petting him as appearances would allow.

To Stephen, in his present dejected condition, her attentions were oddly comforting. He felt like a child that had hurt itself through no fault of its own, and so had a right to sympathy and consolation. Evidently Loo Larken guessed that something had gone wrong with him, and she really was not such a bad sort after all.

'Are you sorry we are going?' she inquired, feeling it was time he put his regret into words.

'By Jove! I should think so.'

'Fancy our being such friends, and we only met yesterday. But with some you feel as if you had known them always.'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps we can persuade Mr. Renny to bring us here first next cold weather, and halt for a week or ten days.'

'That would be delightful; but you won't like coming to Nandi after Mussoorie.'

'Oh yes, I shall,' said Loo slowly and with much meaning. 'I do not forget my friends, and it is not the place I care about—it's the people. You will be back from England, too; how will you like Nandi after *that*?'

'I am not going to England,' he announced, staring into the bottom of his empty cup.

'Oh my! why for?' cried Loo sharply, her heart throbbing with a sudden excitement. Could he have given up his leave on her account?

'I had news in my letter last night that prevents me taking my leave. I shall have to stay on here.'

He spoke indifferently, having no notion of confiding the depth and details of his disappointment to Miss Larken, but he was unaware of her state of mind, and had not reckoned with her curiosity.

'Was your news about your mamma? Is she in trouble?'

'Yes.'

'Does she want rupees?'

'Yes,' admitted Stephen, somewhat confounded by her conjecture; 'but it's not her fault. She can't help it. Her husband has gone blind, and can't paint any more pictures;' and then Miss Larken with great perseverance extracted from him the contents of Mrs. de Vitre's letter.

He found it something of a relief to talk it over, even with her. He also felt that, with the exception of Mr. Green, she might be the last person to whom he could talk in English for many months to come. With this in his mind he spoke more freely than he was quite conscious of doing.

When presently he checked himself he was astonished to see that the girl's bold, dark eyes were full of tears.

'It's such bad luck,' she said, twitching her nose and blinking her eyelids. 'All you wish for you have to give up, and you must stay on in this horrid place, all alone, and with nothing to do but your work.'

'Oh, it will be all right,' said Stephen, feeling awkward, and also vexed with himself for having

told her so much. 'Lots of chaps have to do it, and one must have one's turn of bad luck.'

'Yes,' murmured Loo, looking pensive; 'and perhaps *I* am having *my* turn now.'

'You? How?'

She coughed and fidgeted with the tea-things.

'I am supposed to be engaged, you know, though I do not wear a ring. I do not wear one on purpose, even though I have got it, and the stones are real coral. It is so binding to wear an engagement ring.'

There was mute interrogation on the part of her listener.

'But one cannot run the risk of being an old maid you see, and he is a very good match. He is on the East Indian Railway, and gets 400 rupees a month. And his aunt is married to a gentleman who has a house in a fashionable part of London. We are supposed to be going home for our honeymoon.'

'But what is the matter with it all? It sounds quite satisfactory,' said Stephen, feeling a faint amusement.

'I do not love him,' she replied solemnly, 'and now —there is somebody else who has come into my life.'

Her mouth drooped and she sighed.

'Well, and what about this other chap?'

Stephen was sympathetic, and without suspicion.

'Oh, I don't know—I am not quite sure; he is poor now, and perhaps he does not understand me. I am a girl who could only be in love once, and then I would give up everything in the world for the man. I do not want clothes, or rings, or parties, or England, if I could marry where I have

given my heart. I can make ginger-wine and milk-punch, and I can sing and play, and I know so many card games for two—a man would not be dull with *me*. I am such a good manager, too; I could save money, for I know all the bazaar prices.'

She paused, and Stephen gazed at her in astonishment. Then a sudden intuition of her meaning burst upon his mind. He felt hot and cold alternately. What a predicament to be placed in! Here was the girl practically proposing to him, and how on earth was he to refuse her without hurting her feelings, or letting her see that he had divined her intentions?

'If the fellow you like is hard up, of course he could not marry you or anyone else—it wouldn't be fair,' he said hastily. 'Don't chuck away the substance for the shadow, Miss Larken. Take my advice, and marry the man you are engaged to, who can give you a good home and all you ought to have. You said yesterday that when you married you would expect to have all you wanted and no grumbles,' he laughed nervously.

'I meant,' faltered Loo, 'if I married without love. Alfred Skinner knows that I do not care for him in that way. He says, of course he couldn't expect it, he is very plain, you see—and that he will be quite satisfied and proud if I will only marry him.'

'Then he must be a very good fellow,' said Stephen, with exaggerated heartiness, 'and you'll end by forgetting the other chap and being very fond of Alfred.' Then a happy idea struck him.

'As you have been so kind as to tell me your little secret, I am going to tell you mine. There's a girl at home—you saw her photograph on my mantelpiece—I meant to ask her to marry me when I went on leave. Now I shall have to wait, that's all.'

Loo Larken sat quite still for a minute. Stephen purposely kept his eyes fixed on the cook-house in the compound; he almost felt the girl's mortification vibrating in the atmosphere, and he blamed himself severely for his careless words and flirtatious attitude towards her on the previous day. He was ignorant of the quick emotions and readily-stirred impulses which are so curiously combined with the easy good nature and indolence of those who are born and bred in India, and who have consequently assimilated many racial characteristics of the country, though their descent may be, as with the Larkens, purely European.

Loo was the first to break the rather embarrassing silence. She burst into tears.

'I can't think why God made us at all,' she sobbed dramatically. 'I am sure we cannot be conducive'—she paused in admiration of the word which had come to her unexpectedly—'to His happiness, and He only makes us all miserable. You are unhappy because you cannot go home and see your girl; I am wretched because the man I love is not for me.'

'Cheer up!' said Stephen, patting her shoulder; 'things will come right some day. When you are Mrs. Skinner you'll write and tell me how happy you are. You and I are friends, aren't we? We

know a lot about each other now, and I shall always like to hear how you get on.'

'Yes.'

Loo slowly dried her eyes and spoke with pathetic resignation. She felt sure that, had she only been given time and opportunity, she could have ousted the memory of 'the other girl' from Stephen's heart, and the conviction was, at least, comforting.

'I shall always be your friend, and some day perhaps I shall be able to do you a good turn. One never knows what may happen. I tell you one thing, and that is, *if* I marry Alfred Skinner (and mind you he does not feel at all sure of me), and we go to England, I shall call on that old uncle of yours and tell him what I think of him, and that here you are in this wretched place, poor and dull and alone, and all your life being spoilt through his fault. I believe I will marry Alfred just to be able to do it.'

Stephen laughed aloud as he tried to picture such an impossible scene as an interview between Loo and his old Uncle Edward on the subject of himself. However, Miss Larken was so enchanted with the idea that she had almost regained her usual spirits by the time her relations joined them in the veranda.

The party started earlier than was customary this morning, for the march was a long one, but the departure was a difficult and noisy ceremony. Children, ayahs, and bundles had to be collected; Sue's white umbrella could not be found; Mr. Green, who had promised to ride part of the way

down the bank with them, was late; when everything was ready old Mrs. Larken wanted another cup of tea, and then one of the bullocks that drew the shigram elected to lie down, and only consented to stir after prolonged tail-twistings and abuse. However, the caravan at last moved on, the two girls in the trap alternately quarrelling with each other and conversing loudly with Mr. Green, who acted as outrider; the children with their mother and grandmother packed into the shigram, and Mr. Renny and Stephen riding slowly behind, inspecting bridges, banks, and plantations as they moved along. Dare attended the procession for some miles until he had seen his Executive Engineer safely over the borders of the next sub-division, which was in charge of a native, and after lengthy farewells and a tender hand-pressure from Loo, he galloped back to Nandi.

The compound was littered with traces of the Rennys' visit; the place seemed more than ever silent and deserted, and with a heavy heart he had a late breakfast, and then went to his office-table to clear off his routine work. Afterwards he wrote a long letter to his mother, assured her that he could help her without stinting himself, and added the incorrect statement that his leave had been refused. He also wrote to the bank that all available cash should be sent to his mother at once, and gave instructions that a large proportion of his pay was to be remitted to Mrs. de Vitre every month until further notice.

That evening he wandered down to the river when

the sunset was staining the flat country crimson, and the air was close with odours of hot, dry soil and dusty mango blossom. He felt drawn to the shallow, murmuring water as though to a living thing that could see and hear him; and standing on the brink, where the grass and weeds sheltered rustling, frightened creatures, he thought, as he watched the warm, lazy stream, that perhaps the natives might not be so far wrong when they worshipped and propitiated her as an incarnation of Kali, the goddess of destruction, for there seemed a subtle note of power hidden in the gentle, soothing song. Probably the best years of his life would have to be spent within sound of her waters, and he felt an odd superstitious curiosity as to what she would bring him—would it be sorrow or comfort? The weird fascination of the thought disturbed him, and recalled his old forebodings as to the morbid effect of solitude on temperament.

He moved on, though he kept to the edge of the river, for he was strangely reluctant to leave her side, and suddenly he almost stumbled over a figure that was lying hidden in a sandy cleft of the bank. He sprang back, startled for a moment, then recognised Sunia, Sham Lal's little widowed relative.

She lay asleep, her arms behind her head, her long black eyelashes strongly contrasting with the warm brown of her cheeks. He saw with pity that the silver ornaments were gone from the slender arms and ankles, and that only a few common glass bangles circled the small wrists. A shabby white petticoat and wrapper replaced the coloured gar-

ments she had been wearing the previous day. Evidently she had been forced to bend her will to custom and authority.

Stephen was struck with the graceful pose of the young figure, the tender, rounded limbs, the child-like sweetness of detail, the delicate nose and chin, curved lips, tiny ears, and the silkiness of her fine black hair. No wonder Sham Lal had found her different from the rest of his household; she was completely unlike the ordinary village girl of the plains, and it was very obvious that she favoured the Northern race to which her mother had belonged.

Poor, beautiful, rebellious little soul, with the wild mountain blood in her veins! Perhaps she, too, had come to the Kali Nadi to seek consolation and companionship. He lingered contemplating the sleeping figure, while the sun sank with hot, sulky indolence, and the warm, spicy closeness of the Eastern dusk gathered intensity. He stood and looked, until gradually the river creeping at his feet seemed to be vaguely whispering something that made him turn quickly from the luring murmur, and hurry towards the bungalow without looking back.

As he passed the servants' quarters he despatched his bearer, an old and trustworthy individual, down to the river bank to wake the girl, and send her back to the village.

For a day or two the remembrance of her clung about his mind like a musky perfume that is slow to fade. Then he forgot her, and not until six

weeks after the departure of the Rennys and the Larkens did he see her again.

* * * * *

The hot weather closed over the land like a burning metal cover; the sky lowered and took the glow of copper; the ground shrivelled and hardened till it felt like masonry beneath the feet; and the west wind, with furnace breath, roared and swirled from dawn to sunset in a very passion of blistering heat. Nandi was too remote from any station for Stephen to obtain supplies of ice, and he was forced to use primitive devices for cooling his drinks; the bottles were swung in baskets of damp straw, or stirred in buckets of saltpetre. He tried to reduçe the temperature of his rooms during the day with wet screens of the sweet-scented 'khus-khus' grass placed in the doorways. At night, when the blast lulled, and only the oven heat remained, he lay under the punkah and gasped, till the comparative cool of the hours preceding dawn brought him a short rest. Sometimes when his office work was light he slept heavily throughout the afternoon, and then all the hot, still night he would pace the silent bungalow in slippers and pyjamas, restless and alert, listening to the regular beating note of the coppersmith bird, the ascending shriek of the Indian cuckoo, and the 'tick, tick' of the insects inside the bungalow, and among the dry, brittle grass of the compound.

He had begun to dread the English mail-day. Grateful acknowledgments of the money he had sent home had arrived from Mrs. de Vitre, but

accompanied by fresh tales of woe. She wrote that his unselfish generosity had cleared off the debts and paid for the operation, but now all the children had been down with measles, necessitating more doctors' fees and chemists' bills, and the eldest girl, who was delicate, could not regain her strength. Mr. de Vitre had been ordered out of London for a change, which he wanted badly, and there was no extra money for his going. The last pictures he had painted before his blindness, which they had hoped to sell well, were back on their hands; times were so bad, and people would not buy pictures even from motives of charity. It would be easy enough to manage with care on the allowance Stephen so kindly spared them, were it not for these constant unexpected misfortunes. Everything seemed against them, etc., etc.

And Stephen sold his second pony by advertisement, arranged with the bank for a loan, and saw freedom and furlough retreat further than ever into the dim future.

Fearfully he began to recognise that the vampire of loneliness was draining his vitality, and imprisoning his mental vision. Sometimes the outer world seemed to him merely a phantasy, or his work would assume exaggerated importance till it appeared to be the pivot upon which must turn the whole machinery of the Irrigation Department. Whether his unvarying meals of skinny chickens, sticky country vegetables, and cheese or anchovy savouries were properly cooked or not, asserted itself as a serious matter for positive despair or keen

rejoicing, and his existence was in danger of resolving into one perpetual present without past or future, save for the immediate twenty-four hours.

His condition caused him conscious regret, and even alarm; but he felt mentally paralyzed when he tried to remedy it. He sent for books that were really worth reading, but found that when the heat and his work had tired his brain, novels and illustrated papers gave him less trouble and more enjoyment. Save for the one channel, his work, he knew that his thoughts were becoming blocked, and he now understood all that before had puzzled him in the personalities of men who had led this isolated life for years. Could he have looked forward to furlough within a reasonable time, he felt he might successfully have risen above these enervating circumstances; but his efforts at resistance were weakened and discouraged by the very hopelessness of the knowledge that, until tardy promotion materially increased his income, his present way of life must continue.

CHAPTER VI

SUNIA, the kinswoman of Sham Lal the watchman, moved wearily along the village cart-tract, driving home from the jungle a herd of lean cattle, and their hoofs raised clouds of suffocating dust, through which glowed the sinking sun, broad and red. The hot wind had lulled, and there was a curious, heavy closeness in the air that made the girl glance uneasily at the horizon, expecting to see signs of an approaching storm.

Leisurely, and as though affected by the oppression in the atmosphere, the animals mooned forward, though occasionally a foolish calf would frisk across the road with grotesque leaps and a great display of independence, as though threatening to escape over the plain. Whereupon Sunia would cry warnings to the offender, and whack its flanks with the dry branch she carried for the purpose.

She looked tired and spiritless, dust hung thickly to her eyelashes, and her hair was white with it also; the light of childhood had gone from her face, and though she moved gracefully, with her slender body held erect, her steps lagged, and the voice that called to the beasts was weak and hoarse. Behind, at intervals, came slow groups of cattle driven by

children of various ages—some mere babies, who, nevertheless, urged on the great gray buffaloes with shrill abuse and long sticks, which they wielded with the confidence of experience. The village road was dotted with these moving processions, enveloped in clouds of dust, out of which sounded the mellow tinkle of bells on the necks of the herd leaders.

Sunia's companion in charge of Sham Lal's cattle was his youngest son, a youth of about her own age, who had a very black skin, and a top-knot of coarse hair standing upright on his otherwise shaven scalp. He had taken upon himself the charge of two unruly young buffaloes that had been inclined to stray; but he was an idle, mischievous creature, and at the entrance to the village Sunia was not surprised, on looking round, to find him scuffling and romping with another boy.

'Gunni!' she cried, 'cease thy play; where are the young buffaloes?'

'They are coming behind,' he answered airily; 'they are with the cattle of our neighbour. Drive on thine own charges, and interfere not with the business of thy betters—oh widow cursed of gods and men!'

Gunni and his friend laughed rudely, and continued to shout taunts at the girl, who paid them no outward attention, though her pulses beat quickly with anger. And, as she had anticipated, when the cattle came to be driven into the enclosure for the night, the two young buffaloes were missing.

'This is thy doing, Gunni,' she said to the boy, who stood somewhat crestfallen counting the horned

heads. 'They have strayed away from the herd into the jungle, and there will be great trouble to find them and bring them back, if the wolves do not destroy them. Why didst thou leave them? Their value may be naught to thee, for "can a monkey appreciate ginger?" But thy father will surely be wrath and beat thee. It will be as well, too, for without doubt thou art a budmash.'

'Thou callest me a villain,' he cried, '*thou* whom we feed and clothe the while thou art an outcast, and a disgrace to our house? But "a viper is never grateful." See now—it was thou who lost the buffaloes, and none other.'

Sunia gasped at the audacity of this assertion, and Gunni promptly acted upon his sudden inspiration.

'I will go to my father,' he said severely, 'to tell him that I bade thee see to the two young buffaloes whilst I brought the rest of the herd home, but that thou refused to stay with them and do thy work, and so are the beasts lost, all through thy wickedness. Then we shall see which of us two my father will beat.'

He made an impish grimace at her, and strode triumphantly towards the hut, his long bare legs looking like brown sugar-tongs; and Sunia followed, protesting feebly.

The past six weeks had cruelly subdued her fierce spirit. As a widow she was only permitted to eat the leavings of the family meals, she was obliged to fast on certain days of the week, and she often grew faint from hunger and fatigue. She was beaten, scolded, overworked from morning till night, and

though the rest of the family slept on rude string bedsteads, Sunia had to lie on the floor with no bedding at all. Her ornaments had been taken from her, and were worn now by Sham Lal's younger wife, Gunni's mother; and her only garments were a coarse white petticoat and jacket, with a wrapper of the same material for her head and shoulders. She had to do the menial work of the household, and her services were at everyone's disposal; yet all were against her—for was she not an outcast, an unclean thing, an object of contempt and disgust?—and for the coming years of her life there was no prospect for her of anything better.

She was a creature who naturally loved pleasure, laughter, brightness, and though throughout her young life she had been regarded as an interloper in her uncle's house, her married state had hitherto protected her from actual ill-treatment, and she had been able to assert herself with spirit and defiance. But now that she was a widow she was at the mercy of a cruel custom, and a slave to her relations.

Injustice she bitterly resented, though she never resisted her proper share of work, and she submitted to her misfortunes with a smouldering anger. Her Northern blood rebelled against a treatment that custom ordained she should accept with humble resignation, and at any moment the rage that burned in her heart might blaze into wild, extravagant action.

Whatever she could say now in her own defence she knew very well that Gunni's story would be

believed and her own version treated as a lie, and that probably the long, weary day would terminate in a beating for herself, followed by a tearful night with aching limbs and an empty stomach. Prepared for the worst, she entered the ill-smelling little hut with its mud-plastered floor and heaps of dirty rags in the corners. Her aunt-in-chief was crouched on the ground stirring something in a pot; she was a fat, bald woman, with a snub nose and projecting teeth blackened with betel-nut juice. The *buria*, or grandmother of the establishment, sat with her back against the wall crooning a song and rocking herself to and fro; she was a toothless old creature who looked a hundred, but was probably not more than fifty. Out in the little yard at the back of the house Gunni's shrill voice could be heard relating the iniquities of Sunia to his father.

'Gunni is telling lies,' said the girl defiantly to the two women, and at that moment Gunni's mother came through the door. Her sharp, quick eyes (which always reminded Sunia of a snake's) fastened on her son's accuser as though she would drive them into her like skewers.

'Hark to her evil speaking!' exclaimed the woman. '"What is in the vessel comes out at the spout," and truly she is a sinful being, else why did the gods make her a widow? Go and mix the chupattis, and do not talk,' she added fiercely. 'All day thou hast been idling in the jungle, and now can'st thou find naught to do but stand there and speak evil of my son?'

'I have not been idle,' retorted Sunia unwisely.

Gunni's mother stretched out a powerful hand and forced the girl to her knees, gave her a sounding slap on the side of her head, and pushed her towards the cooking-vessels containing flour and water. 'Mix the chupattis,' she ordered.

Sunia commenced the task in sullen obedience, but just then Sham Lal, followed by the voluble Gunni, entered in search of the culprit who had lost his buffaloes.

'There she sits,' cried Gunni, 'just about to eat food, caring naught where the animals may be! There is a storm approaching, and they will run hundreds of miles in their fear if the wolves do not first destroy them. It is a pity the wolves cannot devour this evil one instead.'

'They shall have her if the buffaloes cannot be found,' said Sham Lal grimly. 'Rise, girl, and go forth to seek the cattle that thou hast lost.'

'I did not lose them,' said Sunia emphatically, without moving; 'and Gunni knows well enough that he lies. I cannot go into the jungle alone at night. The buffaloes may yet find their way back to the village. It was this lying boy who permitted them to stray.'

Instantly the interior of the hut became a scene of confusion and strife. Sham Lal's two wives set upon the little widow, who furiously returned the blows they showered upon her. The old grandmother screamed advice and abuse from her corner, Gunni's father stood ready to assist his spouses should it be necessary, while the cause of all the uproar danced round the struggling group yelling

with excitement. At last Sunia was forced, scuffling and crying, through the doorway, and was told that she should receive neither food nor shelter till the buffalo calves were brought safely home to the village.

Then dread of the coming storm and the night-dangers of the jungle conquered her defiance, and she implored mercy in a paroxysm of fear-stricken humility. She even asserted that the buffaloes had been lost through her own negligence, and that no one was to blame but herself. But she wept and entreated in vain. Sham Lal stood in the doorway and threatened her with his stick, while Gunni peered beneath his father's arms and hooted at her in scorn and triumph. '"Spit at the sun,"' he quoted, '"and the saliva will fall on thy face!"'

There was nothing left for her but to go out and endeavour to find the calves if she wished for food and rest that night; but the very notion of the jungle terrified her, for everyone knew that after sun-down it was peopled with demons and ghosts and vague horrors, and she shivered as she saw the glow of the daylight fading from the flat country.

She moved on with uncertain footsteps. The village was noisy with the return of the labourers from the fields, and a cloud of stifling smoke rose from the fires that were cooking the evening meals; near at hand some children were playing in the dust, and one of them threw a piece of dried soil at her with a contemptuous comment on widows in general. The action seemed to deaden her fear and raise her resentment and sense of injustice to a

climax. She clenched her hands and teeth, and, with her breath coming in quick, angry gasps, she ran out of the village towards the heavy clump of mango-trees which sheltered both the local tank and the shrine of Kali, the goddess of evil.

Sunia's figure hovered white against the dark background before she plunged into the shadow of the trees, but the hot, gloomy stillness failed to calm her frenzy, and she ran on, crying and muttering till she reached the low temple where rested the red-stained image with its hideous countenance and many spoke-like limbs. In front of the idol there burned a primitive lamp, no more than an earthenware pan with a wick floating in coarse oil, and by it lay an offering of rice and flowers. But Sunia pushed both aside with her trembling hands, and prostrated herself in sobbing supplication, her forehead on the ground and her arms wide stretched. She prayed fiercely for comfort in her misery, and that retribution might fall upon her persecutors.

'Oh, Mother Kali,' she cried hoarsely, 'have pity! Naught can I offer to thee but my tears. Be merciful to this worthless child of thine, and bring death and misfortune upon the house of Sham Lal the watchman. Bring pestilence on his cattle and sickness to his women and children, for I hate them one and all who have driven me forth into the jungle, and who have made my life accursed.' She paused, exhausted by the violence of her emotion. 'Give me but a sign,' she whispered tensely—'just but one sign that thou seest me and hearest my petition.'

She looked up, breathless and fearful, into the passive stone face that glared outward into space with a vacancy that seemed to declare an evil indifference to the joy or sorrow, the sin or virtue of mankind. Sunia's heart throbbed with excitement: she had worked herself into an hysterical state of expectancy.

'Speak!' she groaned, and waited with parted, trembling lips and strained eyes.

The idol stared on, callous and calm, and a chill sense of desolation fell upon the suppliant. Sharply the suspicion came to her that the image she had prayed to so passionately was deaf, that all the long years of life stretching before her were devoid of hope or comfort. She knelt rigid, as though listening intently to the convictions that came pressing into her mind.

'You cannot help me!' she screamed with sudden violence.

Her voice pierced the low roof of the temple and rang up to the tree-tops, causing bats and flying foxes to swoop towards the ground, disturbed and resentful. She rose, and, possessed with a blind, mad fury, she kicked again and again at the stone idol with her bare feet.

'You are naught! You are naught! You are naught!' she shrieked, using the inferior mode of address.

The image tottered and swayed, then fell to one side, and the head, striking against the stone wall, broke sharply off at the neck and rolled across the rough floor.

The girl suddenly became conscious of a presence behind her, and, turning, beheld by the flickering light of the oil-lamp the figure of the village priest, a fat Brahmin with shaven head and yellow loin-cloth. With her being still enveloped in a flame of passion, she at first felt neither fear nor shame. In the dim, sickly light she looked like a savage little wild-cat at bay.

'This is thy work?' asked the Brahmin quietly.

'My work!' she shouted defiantly; and then, beneath the cold, passive gaze of the priest, her fierce rage began to evaporate, and, trembling, she hung her head.

'The curse of Kali be upon thee!' he said slowly and monotonously. 'In her own time will she demand reparation. Offerings of peace can avail thee nothing. When Kali is ready, then will there be no way of escape from thy punishment. Depart now, and defile this sacred place no longer.'

He pointed to the door in lofty calm, and, pale and shaking, Sunia stumbled out into the shadow of the trees. The horizon glowed between their trunks in dark purple patches, and an ominous rustling in the leaves told her that the expected storm was at hand. Her simple mind was in confusion. She felt numb, and unable to grasp the magnitude of what she had done. She only knew that now, in addition to the miseries of her life, she was to be haunted and pursued day and night by some unknown and horrible fate, which at any moment might descend and destroy her. She was under the curse of Kali, who was evil incarnate, who was only

restrained from working destruction on the whole of mankind by unceasing propitiation and obeisance. What would be the fate of anyone mad enough to deliberately insult the deity?

Then, as she went blindly on like a person sleep-walking, she remembered the vacant, flat countenance, the absence of any sign, the seeming inability of the idol to see her or hear her entreaties, and in her heart she cried out again, 'It was naught but stone: how can it harm me?'

Immediately terrified of the result even of this thought, she crouched on the roots of a tree and tried to think out her situation. She must find some way of protecting herself if this terrible danger threatened. Surely there were other gods. She had heard of Brahma, who was almost too unapproachable in his greatness for an ordinary humble villager to importune. There was Ganesh, the elephant god, but he was no match, she knew, for the terrible goddess. She could think of no counteracting power that would deliver her from the curse of Kali. Suddenly her memory flew back to a bright cold-weather afternoon, over a year ago, when the white priest had stood in the village street and talked about his God, who, he had said, was all kindness and mercy, good to wicked people as well as to those who committed no sin, willing to help, to comfort, to forgive.

She had unconsciously retained in her impressionable mind a few words that now came back to her with a distinctness that was almost audible. The padre had uttered them in simple Hindustani that

the dullest and most ignorant could understand—'Come to me all who are in trouble, and to you will I give peace and gladness.'

Sunia wished she could find the padre's God, who possibly might protect her from the curse of Kali, and punish and frighten Sham Lal and his household until they treated her with kindness. But who could give her the information she needed? She had heard of a blacksmith's son in the next village who last year had believed the padre sahib's words and become a Christian; since then he had died from snake-bite, and everyone attributed his tragic death to the vengeance of the Hindu gods. There was also an old sweetmeat-seller in Nandi who maintained that after the white priest's visit the sahib's God had appeared to him and said that if he married a girl of the gipsy tribe (which was forbidden by his caste) the sin would be forgiven and riches and prosperity would be showered upon him; by which he was convinced that the religion of the Christians was the true religion.

Nothing dreadful had happened to the sweetmeat-seller. He had married the gipsy girl; his trade was thriving; strong twin boys had been born to him; and he had actually come upon a vessel filled with old silver coins when he was repairing the wall of his house. Good luck had been his from the moment of his forsaking the faith of his fathers.

But for some reason even unknown to herself Sunia distrusted the sweetmeat-seller, and felt reluctant to apply to him for instruction. She turned the matter over in her mind, and presently a timid

suggestion presented itself—what of the sahib who lived in the canal bungalow, and who had been kind to her weeks ago when Sham Lal was about to beat her? Would it be possible to go to the sahib—to tell him all her trouble, of the danger she dreaded from Kali's desire for vengeance? If only he would permit her to live in his compound under the protection of himself and his God—allow her to look after the fowls, weed the garden, pull the punkahs—what she did could matter nothing since she was now beyond the pale of caste or custom. She remembered the sahib's blue eyes, his curious yellow hair, his fair skin. Surely he was very beautiful, and must resemble his own God in face as well as in kindness of heart. She got up, and with blind impulse left the shelter of the tree and began to run towards the aqueduct.

Panting and breathless she crossed the mighty structure, flitted onwards down the canal bank, passed through a gap in the mud wall of the compound, and crept along under shelter of the boundary till she was within a few yards of the bungalow. Then she became conscious that the storm was very near—that a smothering silence brooded over the little colony, and that not a living thing was to be seen. Stealthily she moved towards the solid square building, looking about her with trembling precaution, and as she reached the back veranda the air grew dark as night and the storm burst. She turned to run for refuge to the servants' quarters, but the wind lifted her off her feet and flung her violently against the steps. She crawled up them and tried

to stand erect in the shelter of a pillar, but again the wind caught her, and, dumb with terror, she was driven unresisting, like a helpless bird, through an open door.

* * * * *

The same evening Stephen stood in the front veranda to watch the purple mass of cloud gathering on the horizon. The monsoon was but just about due in Bombay, and this could only be a local thunder-shower, or a dust-storm, but he regarded the growing density with hopeful anticipation, for even a few drops of rain would mean a cooler night.

Suddenly the wind ceased and a premonitory stillness hung in the air; the sky looked livid, and there was a singular absence of all noise—no murmuring of servants' voices, not a bird's cry, nor so much as a distant sound from the village. Everything seemed simultaneously to have gone into hiding, with the exception of three or four big brown kites that turned and wheeled silently in the air.

Stephen's dogs became restless and uneasy, and began to experience the same uncomfortable feeling of presentiment from which they suffered when about to be washed; but whether the present disagreeable forebodings were connected with their master's wishes, as in the case of the washings, seemed a matter of doubt, and Sally sat at his heels with an air of disconsolate resignation, while Pluck and Slipper retired beneath the writing-table to await events with injured forbearance.

Gradually a dull rolling sound vibrated on the hot

atmosphere; the wind rose again, and, howling, drove from the distance a dark wall of copper-coloured dust that carried with it leaves and sticks and bits of hard soil, that waltzed and whirled in pillared masses, that flung itself heavily on to the cowering trees and shaking bungalow.

Stephen and Sally rushed inside, blinded and bewildered. Doors were banging, tables and chairs were overturned, papers sailed in the air like kites, the drugget was rising from the floor in high billows. He called for the servants, but the wind outshouted him; his eyes and throat smarted from the dust. He struggled with the door through which he had entered, and managed with difficulty to shut it; then groped his way in the darkness and turmoil to the opposite entrance which led to the back premises. Just as his hands grasped the swaying panel, a figure fluttered past him into the room. He thought the punkah-coolie had taken refuge from the storm, and loudly bade him help with the closing of the doors. But there was no response, and when he had shot the bolts he turned round in indignation to make out in the weird half light no trembling, disobedient punkah-coolie, but the native girl he had last seen sleeping by the river.

CHAPTER VII

WITHIN the bungalow the tumult calmed, and the roar of the wind outside sounded muffled with the closing of the doors. The room was insufferably hot, filled with a thick dusty dimness; and the native girl seen through the blur and haze looked elfin with her wild hair, shining eyes, and white clothing.

'What are you doing here?' Stephen said harshly; but even as he spoke, there came a terrific crash and rattle of broken glass and splintering wood. The storm, swelling to a climax, had forced open the long door-windows, and the wind, and dust, and darkness hurtled through the space.

Above the din pierced a shrill Hindustani scream: 'It is Kali! It is the judgment of Kali! Save me! I am afraid—I am afraid!' He felt thin fingers clinging to his arms, and in the midst of the confusion and violence, he sheltered the trembling little body involuntarily, till, with a burst of thunder, the hurricane passed on, the wind lulled, and a shower of huge rain-drops fell heavily, hissing and steaming as they hit the hard, parched ground. Stephen crossed with haste to the other side of the room. For a moment he and his companion had been

merely two human beings brought to a helpless equality by the despotism of the storm; now that light and comparative quiescence had returned, he was again the English sahib, and Sunia was just a native village girl who had no business in his bungalow at all. But, in spite of his feeling of annoyance, he was unwillingly conscious of her bodily grace as she threw herself at his feet, clinging and crying, and pouring out disjointed sentences, of which he could make nothing, concerning lost buffaloes and the anger of the goddess Kali.

The girl was evidently in a wild state of terror and distress, and paid no attention to Stephen's peremptory request that she would rise and speak quietly. He left her grovelling on the floor, and went out into the veranda to meet Muttroo, his old Mahomedan bearer, who came up the steps adjusting his turban and clothing, disarranged by the wind.

'Go inside,' said Stephen abruptly, 'and find out what is the matter with that girl of Sham Lal's, and make her go away. He felt impatient over his own helplessness in the matter; and as the punkah-coolies emerged from the stables, he shouted furiously at them for having deserted their posts. Sally stood by and barked self-righteously, as she invariably did when he raised his voice to any offender.

It was some minutes before Muttroo came out of the sitting-room, holding Sunia by the wrist. The girl hung back and expostulated and wept.

'There is great trouble concerning her,' said the old man, 'and she wishes for thine Honour's protection. But why should the sahib be worried with

the low-born niece of a Hindu watchman? If she will not go back to her village, she can remain in my house until Sham Lal comes to fetch her. Without doubt she has been badly used, but a dependent knows no happiness, and she is a widow, so what can she expect? Come,' he added sharply to his prisoner, 'and cease making this noise before the sahib.'

Sunia raised piteous golden-brown eyes, dripping with tears, to Stephen's face. Her delicate features were drawn with distress, and the young man's tender heart was touched by the pathetic helplessness of her appearance.

'Sham Lal will kill me,' she sobbed; 'do not send me from the compound, sahib. I will pull the punkah; I will weed the garden; I will feed the beasts; I will ask no wages.'

She wrenched herself free from the bearer and again fell at Stephen's feet.

'Tch! tch!' clicked Muttroo, who was a benevolent old person, and who also hated Sham Lal and would have sided with anyone against him. 'It is a bad business. Sham Lal is an evil-tempered being. If he takes her back, there is no saying what may happen; but, perhaps, if the sahib gave the order, the girl might be permitted to remain here for the present. She could work for her food, and there are many ways in which she might be useful—also, my wife is old and needs help with her cooking.'

'Oh, take her away,' said Stephen, freeing his feet from the clinging hands, 'and make any arrangement you like, but if Sham Lal says he wants her back she will have to go.'

'No, no!' screamed Sunia.

'Hai—ai!' remonstrated Muttroo, pouncing on her and hauling her to her feet. 'Now if you are quiet and behave yourself, we will see what can be done; but by worrying the sahib, and crying, and making all this bobbery, you will bring the anger of everyone upon your head. Come with me now, quickly.'

Stephen retreated into the bungalow, for a small crowd of punkah-coolies and syces' children had collected at a short distance, and other servants were appearing at the doors of their outhouses, curious to see what was happening.

The couple left the veranda, and he saw them crossing the compound—the old bearer, with his gray beard and bow legs, leading the way; and the girl following humbly, slender, young, and supple as a fawn.

Mechanically he began to pick up papers, right the chairs and drugget, and note with petulance the thick coating of dust that lay over everything, himself included. Amongst the débris on the floor he saw the broken halves of a little blue glass bangle, and with a sense of regretful reluctance he picked it up. The touch of it brought back the impression of little clinging hands, the contact of a slight figure, and the curious Oriental odour of spice and musk that revolted him and yet so strangely stirred his senses. He put the pieces down on the mantelpiece, then quickly took them up again, for he saw that he had placed them in front of Georgie Dalison's photograph.

'Damn!' he said crossly, and flung the broken

bangle down, shivering it to fragments on the concrete hearth. The servants came in to dust and tidy, and he went to the veranda to watch the rain, which was now a steady downpour.

That night as he ate his dinner, hindered and disgusted by the swarms of insects that seemed to have been called into being by the rain, a sudden disturbance arose outside.

The shrill cries of a woman, and a man's voice, loud and angry, clashed in discord, and then came the quick padding of bare feet as the entire compound hurried to the spot attracted by the clamour. Muttroo, who was waiting at table, hastily deserted his duties and disappeared into the darkness without; but Stephen sat resolved not to interfere, for he guessed that Sham Lal had come to claim his troublesome relative. But presently other voices were added in noisy argument, the dogs ran out and barked, the dinner seemed to have been forgotten, and at last Stephen rose, impatient and irritated, and strode into the veranda.

By the feeble rays of a couple of hand-lanterns that had been deposited on the ground, he saw, indistinctly, a group of servants, coolies, women and children, clustered about the figure of the watchman, whose coat shone yellow even in the uncertain light. Everyone was talking and vociferating, and Muttroo was vainly endeavouring to establish order.

'This is shameful!' shouted the old man as he pushed and cuffed amongst the excited little crowd; 'and see now, there is the sahib himself,' as

Stephen's outline showed dark against the lighted sitting-room behind him.

Instantly the uproar ceased, and the group dispersed, subdued and abashed—all but Sham Lal the watchman, and Muttroo the bearer, who stood one on either side of a little white heap on the ground.

'What does all this mean?' demanded Stephen in anger.

'Doubtless the woman is dead,' said Muttroo grimly. 'He beat her and she fell.'

Sham Lal was beside himself with rage.

'If she is dead, it is well; if she is not, I will slay her and throw her body to the wolves. She has lost my buffaloes, she has damaged Kali in the temple, and now the priest demands money and offerings, else will the curse of the goddess fall upon my household. I have no money, and am a ruined man. I have spent it all on this offspring of shameless parents. My children and women will starve, for the priest is angry and Kali is wrath, and reparation must be made by *me* for the sins of this child of a pig!'

He addressed Stephen and the bearer in turns, holding out his hands, palms upwards, and speaking rapidly in shrill, hoarse tones that shook with passion.

'She shall not come back to pollute and defile my house; she is without caste, or religion, or shame; she has made my name a reproach in the village. I would rather shelter the swine. She shall die, and may she become a worm or a rat and suffer everlasting torment.'

'If you kill her the police will call it murder, and you will be hanged,' said Muttroo practically.

'This won't do,' interrupted Stephen, who had been looking at the motionless heap with serious alarm. What if Sham Lal had really killed the wretched child? 'You have no right to kill or hurt her, whatever she has done. Be silent, and go to your home at once; if you will not keep the girl and treat her properly, she must stay here, and Muttroo's wife will look after her until I can arrange something. Now go,' he commanded, as Sham Lal stood sullen and defiant, 'or you will be dismissed from Government service; a reason would not be hard to find.'

The last significant sentence was effectual. With a muttered remonstrance, and a malignant glare at the sahib and his bearer, Sham Lal picked up his lantern and moved away. As they bent over the prostrate body they heard the clatter of his large, loose shoes grow fainter.

'Is she hurt?' said Stephen anxiously.

To his relief she stirred, and then rose slowly to her feet, apparently unharmed; but she staggered a little, and pushed the hair from her eyes as though bewildered. She looked up helplessly into Stephen's face, and, placing her hands together, bent and touched his feet, speaking brokenly:

'You are my father and my mother. I will never leave you. I will worship the God of the Christians. I am the slave of the Protector of the Poor, and whatever he asks of me that will I do. My life is his, for surely but for him would Sham Lal have slain me; and now am I safe and free——'

'Come with me,' said Muttroo gruffly, 'and see that you behave yourself, since the sahib in his kindness permits you to remain in the compound till an arrangement can be made. Chelo!' (go along).

He urged her forward to the servants' outhouses, and Stephen returned, vexed and disturbed, to his belated dinner. What was he to do with this girl who, it would appear, had effectually cut herself adrift from caste and kind? The most suitable arrangement that suggested itself was to hand her over to the missionaries. This would probably entail considerable trouble and correspondence, and, moreover, how was he to ascertain the whereabouts of the nearest mission people?

But he knew in the depths of his heart that the sooner she was away from the vicinity of his bungalow the better.

* * * * *

In spite of the fall in the temperature after the storm, Stephen slept badly that night. Dozing, he dreamed of the beauty of the native woman; waking, he fought hard to wring his thoughts clean of her image. Very early in the morning he got up, moody and unrested, ordered his pony and called the dogs.

Before he started he selected a hog-spear. If he came across a pig he would 'ride' him. It would be a satisfaction to kill something that would show fight.

The coolness of the dawn refreshed him; relief was in the air, though he knew it was but temporary, and that to-morrow the heat would be worse than ever. The slight change acted like a tonic, and his

spirits rose. Jane gave a vigorous buck as she cantered on to the canal bank, and the dogs danced before her barking. They crossed the aqueduct, a cheerful little party, and Stephen spying Mr. Green seated in his veranda over his early tea, called to him to come out and join them.

'A gallop will do you good, and we shan't get another morning like this in a hurry. Come along, Green.'

'But you are going pig-sticking'—the little man eyed the hog-spear with timid distaste—'and I do not care for that sport. Riding so quickly does not agree with me.'

'Oh no, I'm not really going after pig, or I shouldn't have brought the dogs. I only thought if I came across one I might have a dig at him. I felt a bit bloodthirsty when I started. Hurry up!'

Mr. Green hesitated. He wished to remain safely where he was and smoke rank cheroots in a long cane chair; but his nature was of a servile order, and he had not the moral courage to refuse and please himself.

'I must get ready, then,' he said resignedly. He was clothed in slippers and pyjamas. 'But I think the syce has taken my horse out to exercise.'

'No, he hasn't'—Stephen was without mercy—'I can see your dun-coloured pony picketed outside the stable.'

'Oh, very well; don't wait, I will follow you.'

Mr. Green disappeared mournfully into the house, and Stephen rode on laughing to himself.

'Green would far rather be inside than outside a

horse any day,' he thought, and made for a patch of low scrubby jungle in the open country, where probably lurked a fox or a jackal that might give them a good excuse for a gallop.

As the dogs rushed into the covert something sneaked out a hundred yards ahead and went cantering off with an occasional backward look. It was hard to tell, as the creature threaded its way through the thorny scrub and tussocks of yellow grass, whether it might be a pig or a large jackal; but the dogs had already seen it, and were off in pursuit, loudly giving tongue. Stephen followed at the mare's best speed. She was a self-willed, hard-mouthed pony, but keen enough when there was anything to go for, and they had a sharp burst of half a mile before they came up with the baying little pack. Ahead the gray beast still lollopped along, apparently exerting itself but little, though in reality going at a great pace; and now Stephen discovered, with some dismay on account of the dogs, that he was chasing a very large wolf.

He had never before come across one in open country, though he knew that wolves were numerous in the district, and dreaded by the people. Occasionally he had caught glimpses of them skulking home to their lairs late in the evening, or slinking through the canal plantations in the early dawn after a night's hunting; and once or twice since he had been at Nandi he had heard reports of children being carried off whilst playing outside the villages, and even of women and old people being attacked.

To try and call off the dogs while they were in

full cry, and as long as the wolf ran, would be useless, so Stephen rode hard, for if the brute turned, as they usually did before going very far, Slipper and Pluck and Sally would need all the assistance that he could give them. He felt thankful he had brought the spear, and he urged Jane forward, anxious to destroy, without compunction, a creature that has a coward's nature, and that only attacks when the victim is helpless and inexperienced. Often he had felt a keen regret when disposing of a boar, an animal that is strong, brave, fierce, direct and honest in the fight, and that when beaten dies without a sound, despising any hint of weakness. But to kill a wolf would be an act of vengeance, and a benefit to the district.

He urged Jane on, feeling his blood tingle with excitement, and the white pony raced, taking her share of pleasure in scouring along. But suddenly the wolf stopped, and turned, with gleaming eyes and teeth, and bristles erect, to receive Pluck, who was close up to him. Stephen expected to see the dog turn tail, for Sally and Slipper were already hesitating; but with the blood of his Irish mother's people rampant in his veins, he bounded forward to close with the enemy. Stephen passed him with a spurt, for he knew that the odds were hopelessly against Pluck; he raised his arm, and aimed at the crouching gray shoulder, driving the spear deep. But Jane was going fast, the spear was an old one, and weakened by an insect that bores into the bamboo; it snapped, and Stephen lost his balance, falling head downwards on to the hard ground.

Half an hour later Mr. Green, riding slowly along under protest on his dun-coloured pony, found his superior officer lying insensible with a dead wolf near him, three unhappy dogs sitting by their master whining and licking his hands and face, and the white pony careering in wide circles round the group, snorting, her tail erect, and the bridle hanging loose over her head.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was not until late in the afternoon, just as the sun was losing the full fierceness of his power, that Stephen came back to consciousness and opened his eyes.

'Were the dogs bitten?' he said in Hundustani, and, as though in answer, Sally squirmed up from his feet, where she had lain watchful and miserable for hours, and, whimpering, licked his hands with wistful rapture.

The bed had been moved into the centre room of the bungalow, and at its foot stood Mr. Green with a Bengali apothecary. The latter was the nearest approach to a medical man within reasonable distance of Nandi, being in charge of a small Government dispensary in a village five miles away. He had a round, pouting face, pitted with small-pox, and was dressed in a long, tight coat of black alpaca, with a velvet pork-pie cap on his head, embroidered in coloured silks. Much to his consternation and annoyance he had been peremptorily summoned from his mid-day siesta, and compelled to drive across country in a jolting ekka in the heat of the day to attend to the injured canal officer.

'There, now you see,' Mr. Green was saying

argumentatively; 'I told you he was not dead. He speaks.'

'He had all a dead appearance,' deprecated the babu, 'and he has lost all so much blood. But Europes are a bloody people. My medical skill is confined to the East Indian inhabitants, and competence elsewhere is shaky.'

'But go to him again, man, and see what you can do,' urged Mr. Green, dismayed by the apothecary's lack of confidence in his own powers where a white patient was concerned. 'Go again and examine; he is moving.'

The native approached the bed with caution, evidently much perturbed by the discovery that Dare was not dead after all, and he laid his fingers on the young man's pulse as though the wrist were an explosive that might at any moment destroy him. Stephen watched him through half-closed eyelids with a sense of detachment as if he himself were far distant. His head was throbbing under the now hard, caked bandage, his limbs were stiff and sore, and one of his ankles was causing him acute pain. He felt like two people, one of whom regarded with lofty indifference the important anxiety of Mr. Green and the babu's nervous ministrations, while the other was impatiently disposed to order the couple from his sight and presence without ceremony.

'Bet-tah,' pronounced the apothecary, staring solemnly through horn-rimmed spectacles. The perspiration rolled down his fat cheeks, and a strong odour of cocanut oil emanated from his person.

'For God's sake get me something cold to drink!

Send Muttroo here, and leave me alone!' said Stephen unexpectedly, which caused Gopal Dass to spring back in alarm.

Mr. Green came forward fussy and conversational.

'Oh, Mr. Dare, what a terrible toss you got! I thought when I rode up and saw you lying on the ground, "this is what comes of pig-sticking." Then I saw that the pig was a wolf, and you had your head cut and were bleeding most awfully. I went for your men and we carried you in, but we could not bring you round, so I sent for Gopal Dass here, who said you were dead.'

'I'm all right now,' said Stephen crossly. 'Tell him to go.'

But Mr. Green wisely insisted that Gopal Dass should re-dress the wound on the forehead, take the patient's temperature, and administer a fever preventive before he returned to the dispensary, which he declared, with many long-winded explanations, it was imperative he should do that evening. It was also discovered that one ankle was sprained, and this had to be bandaged.

There followed a long night of restlessness and pain for Stephen, throughout which he was attended alternately by Mr. Green and the old bearer, and watched with anxious concern by the devoted Sally. At times he was delirious, and once, just before dawn, he beckoned Mr. Green to his bedside, and in a hoarse, mysterious whisper told him that a native girl was crouching in the veranda, and peering through the bamboo blind.

'But let her stay there; she's doing no harm. Only,' he continued, raising his voice in a loud, argumentative tone, 'she's not to come inside, because, although she's a native, she's such a infernally pretty little creature——'

'No, no; *of* course, *of* course,' soothed Mr. Green. And, turning to Muttroo, he added: 'The Sahib is *behosh* (delirious) again. He thinks there is a woman watching him from the veranda. There is no one there but just the punkah-wallah, h'n?'

Muttroo lifted the blind and looked out. The night was thick and suffocating. Close to the door was something that in the dimness resembled a bale of white cotton. In the middle of the veranda a punkah-coolie was huddled up, dozing, on an inverted packing-case pulling the rope mechanically.

'Pull with more force, brother,' said the old man loudly, and while inside the room the voice of the sahib held the attention of Mr. Green, he gave the white bundle a furtive push.

'What are you doing here?' he whispered. 'Depart at once; the sahib would be very angry.'

'Nay,' came a smothered but determined answer; 'I stay here.'

'Tch! tch!' protested Muttroo, annoyed.

'I will help to pull the punkah, and I am at hand should aught be needed from the cook-house. Oh, say, Muttroo, will the sahib live or die?'

'Hush-sh!'

The old man turned back into the room.

'It is but a coolie woman who awaits her turn at the punkah,' he said.

He considered that a correct explanation to the subordinate sahib was not necessary.

Mr. Green sniggered. He almost wished that the bearer could share the joke, and understand the amazing description that Mr. Dare, in his delirium, was giving of a common coolie woman. Imagination could do much when stimulated by a high temperature. Stephen's voice grew louder, and he clutched the little man's arm.

'Oh my!' exclaimed Mr. Green; 'I hope he is not going to be wiolent.'

'You know,' Dare was asserting earnestly, 'I'm in a confounded position—I can't get away from this beastly place. I never shall be able to get away from it till I don't care whether I stay here or not. . . . The girl wants to stop in the compound, and if she does—and I'm always seeing her—I know what the end of it will be. Although she's a native—and I must say I bar natives——'

He waited for the acquiescence of Mr. Green, who nodded his head vehemently.

'And then,' Stephen went on, still in the same high-pitched, aggressive voice, 'what about Georgie Dalison? . . . I say, what about Georgie Dalison?'

'*All* right—*all* right,' said Mr. Green, trying to free his arm from the hot, shaking hand, but the sick man clung on tenaciously.

'I'm young, and I hate being alone . . . I'm not booky or clever enough to like solitude . . . the life is awful—the life is awful. . . . If that girl is about the place, and I'm always seeing her, I shall have to give up thinking of Georgie Dalison . . . but

what would it matter—who cares what I do? I shall never go home. . . . Georgie will be married long before I can ever hope to get home . . . why should I bother?—why should I? . . . That native girl's beauty is extraordinary, I tell you . . . she is like a highly-bred little animal . . . naturally perfect . . . but she's black . . . and I don't. . . . What are you laughing at, Green? Wait till you see her; but by Jove!' with sudden ferocity, 'if *you* ever interfere with her I'll break your neck!'

'Oh, no!' reassured Mr. Green, controlling his amusement; 'I shall not interfere, you may be sure. No coolie women for me, thank you!' He quite enjoyed the strange conversation, for though he knew that Mr. Dare's mind was wandering, it gratified him, under any circumstances, to be addressed by his superior officer as though they were equals. 'Come now,' he urged, 'do not think any more of coolie women, but drink this and try to get some sleep.'

'Coolie women?' said Stephen, in feeble bewilderment, the light of reason returning to his eyes as he drank the cold mixture. 'Oh, Lord! my head! Just turn my pillow over please, Green, there's a good fellow, it's like a hot water-bottle this side; and put some more of that stuff on my ankle, will you? That's better. Thank you. Now, you needn't bother about me any more.'

He lay quiet, presently sinking into a heavy sleep, and by the time the bursting of the yellow dawn had dispersed the darkness Mr. Green felt justified in leaving the patient in Muttroo's charge while he

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went over to his bungalow for food and a bath. As he passed through the veranda, he saw a woman's figure, with shrouded head, seated on the packing-case, pulling steadily at the rope, while the punkah-coolie lay snoring in a corner.

'The lovely coolie woman, I suppose,' laughed Mr. Green to himself; and he thought regretfully of the bazaar beauties that enchanted him when he went on leave to Cawnpore—ostensibly to visit his mother.

* * * * *

In a couple of days the fever had subsided, the wound in the forehead was healing, and the bruises were less painful, but the injured ankle kept Stephen a prisoner for more than a week. He was forced to lie still through the slow, hot hours, and had to write his official letters on a blotting-pad, and give careful directions to Mr. Green regarding the outdoor work. For the rest of the day he dozed and read alternately, talked to the dogs and to Muttroo, and was unspeakably weary and bored. The rains were close at hand, the west wind had ceased, and wet grass screens were useless for cooling the close, muggy atmosphere. The flies and mosquitos were a torment, and the days seemed interminable.

One morning, when he caught sight of the little Hindu widow handing something to Muttroo in the veranda, he felt almost inclined to call her in to talk to him, but prudence prevailed, and he merely inquired from the bearer how the girl was getting on.

'Well enough,' said the old man; 'but she is wilful, and already has she caused discord in the compound.

Ram Din, the syce, gave her a cowrie-shell for protection against the evil eye, and his wife is angry. But Sunia works well, and fear of thine Honour's displeasure keeps her in order.'

'She must go to the missionaries sooner or later,' said Stephen resolutely; 'there is nothing else to be done.'

'She is as wayward as a swallow,' remarked Muttroo, with some doubt, 'and may give trouble about leaving.'

'She will have to do as she is told.'

Muttroo reflected for some moments, rubbing the big toe of one foot up and down the instep of the other, always an indication that some important problem was occupying his mind.

'Has the Presence no thought,' he began, 'of keeping her for himself? Sham Lal would make no difficulty. She could live in the empty side-room—a charpoy and some cooking vessels, and a few silver ornaments would content her, and when the room was required for other sahibs, she could return for the time to my dwelling. Certainly she is of no account, but she is young and fair, and "In a treeless country the castor-oil plant is a big tree!" The Sahib is unmarried. What could be a better arrangement?'

'Oh, shut up!' said Stephen abruptly; and Muttroo went about his duties, feeling injured and puzzled at the manner in which his well-meant suggestion had been received; while his master took up a book and read moodily, finally falling into a restless sleep.

Later, Stephen awoke to the absolute stillness

that descends upon an Indian establishment at midday. He was very thirsty, and shouted the usual summons for a servant, but got no answer. The long door-windows were closed to keep out the heat, but through the glass panes and transparent bamboo blind he could see, as he raised himself on his elbow, that the coolie, pulling the punkah rope, was a deaf, senile old person whose attention it was impossible to attract. He shouted again without effect, and then lay, his throat dry and burning, and planned punishments and reprimands for the faithless Muttroo, and the peon who had deserted his post within call.

Presently the blind was furtively moved aside, and the door gently pushed open. In a moment he knew instinctively who was there, and, feigning to close his eyes, he watched Sunia as she cautiously slid through the narrow opening and stood in hesitation on the threshold of his room. Involuntarily he felt glad that Sally was not in the room to rise up and bark, as she undoubtedly would have done, and he lay motionless, watching the girl with interest, as one gazes at a little wild creature that has timidly emerged from its shelter ready to be startled into retreat by the least movement. Her lips were parted breathlessly, showing the row of small, snowy teeth; her lustrous eyes were anxious and intent. Stephen stirred slightly and she started; he could see her slender body palpitate under the thin cotton clothing. She leaned forward, one hand held out with the fingers spread apart, and listened expectantly, and when Stephen opened his eyes, looking full at her,

she salaamed in quick apology, and turned as though to go.

'What do you want?' he said, with impatience. 'Where is the bearer? Go and fetch him.'

'My lord, pardon. The fever came upon Muttroo the bearer an hour ago. He lies in his house, but he bade me fetch him if the sahib spoke. I was in doubt whether I heard a call, and I did but enter to make sure.'

'Well, never mind,' said the sahib in irritable resignation. 'Go and get a bottle of water from the saltpetre-bucket, and a tumbler from the pantry.'

He was parched with thirst, and he told himself that Muttroo could hardly be disturbed with fever on him, and that if one of the other servants were aroused from his mid-day sleep he would be hours putting on his coat and puggaree.

Quietly and swiftly the girl did his bidding, with an intelligence that was surprising in a native unaccustomed to European households. Her oval face glowed with pleasure, and her little hands trembled with excitement. She waited while he drank, watching him eagerly, then took the glass from him and lingered.

'Do the flies cause annoyance, sahib?' she asked with anxious concern. 'Shall thy slave sit here and drive them away?'

She picked up a palm-leaf fan that lay on the table, and Stephen, weak from illness, dull, weary, and longing for any sort of companionship, allowed her to stay, and gave himself the dangerous pleasure of contemplating her beauty at his leisure. She

crouched happily on the floor by the side of his bed, and with one round, bare arm outstretched, gently waved the fan to and fro at the right distance from his face. The cool draught ruffled his hair and played over his hot temples, and the flies that had defied the punkah and been so maddeningly persistent departed to dance intricate figures high up in the ceiling.

The room seemed very peaceful, and the young man's weary, restless irritation gradually gave place to a calm content. He lazily wondered what manner of thought lay behind the brilliant eyes and delicate little face before him. Had she any acute consciousness of being, or did she never think at all? She appeared to be bright, intelligent, and independent, and yet her mind could hardly be more developed than that of a backward child, considering the narrow seclusion of her life and circumstances.

'Do you miss your people?' he asked suddenly.

A look of alarm crept over her features, and for a space the fan ceased to wave.

'The sahib will surely not order me to return to them?' she said beseechingly. 'There was I beaten and starved till I ran away, and now should I be slain if I returned; here am I happy, and never before have I known such peace and contentment.'

'No, you are not going back; but you cannot stay here always.'

'Why not? I will never go away, sahib. I will remain here and work for my lord and his servant Muttroo.'

She spoke with earnest confidence, and even as

though the sahib might possibly need reassurance on the point, for, to her native mind, she was paying him the highest tribute of respect and gratitude in cleaving to his establishment—a point of view that is often highly inconvenient to a benefactor.

'But if you go to the missionaries you will learn to sew, and read and write, and sing. You will be very happy.'

She shook her head obstinately.

'Why should I want to read and write? What is the use of such wisdom to a woman? Is it not even written that it is sin to teach a woman anything? But already am I learning from Muttroo's wife how to sew—I almost understand how it is done. I can sing—I have always been able to sing since I was so high. I know the song of the spinning-wheel, and the mill-stone, and the wild plum-tree, and many others, though the meaning of some of them I do not understand. What more is necessary? Shall I sing now, that the sahib may know that I speak truth?'

Stephen nodded with indulgent amusement, and prepared to be harrowed by a discordant nasal chant, such as he sometimes heard issuing from the recesses of the compound where the women cooked and gossiped, and the children rolled in the dust. But the girl threw back her head, and, clasping her hands round her knees, with the palm-fan still held between the fingers, sang in a sweet, plaintive voice a curious haunting little melody, that swung soothingly to and fro in the close, still room. The words were rough, the meaning not very clear, but it was

something about a spinning-wheel, and the lot of an overworked peasant woman. Somewhat idealized, it might have been rendered thus:

'Spin the yarn, spin the yarn—faster, faster!
Time is going quickly, and the cotton must be spun;
For when my life is over, and I pass into the shadow,
I cannot take it with me—I must leave the rest undone.

'Turn the wheel, turn the wheel—rest not, rest not!
Spin from early crow-caw till the evening brings an end;
But when the wheel is quiet, and the weary day is over,
Who will thank thee for thy labour? Say, "What wouldest thou, my friend?"

'Spin the yarn, spin the yarn—patience, patience!
Fate hath made thee woman, and thy destiny is Care;
But remember that the trouble, and the toiling, and the burden,
Is meat and drink for others, and that thou hast done thy share.'

She stopped, and looked eagerly to him for approbation. He applauded her readily, astonished that native singing could have given him so much pleasure.

'Is not that enough?' she asked, with gay triumph. 'Could the padre-people teach me better?' She laughed, then grew grave again. 'There is one thing, Huzoor . . .'

She paused timidly, then glanced behind her.

'What is it?' he encouraged.

'Still am I under the curse of Kali,' she said, almost in a whisper. 'The sahib has heard that I —that I—what I did in the temple? The priest said that henceforth was I accursed, and that the

vengeance of Kali would follow me. In the night I awake and fear unspeakably. Then in light and sun, and in the presence of others, do I forget.'

Stephen was hardly attending to her words. He was looking at the pretty curve of her neck, noting her satin skin, her starry eyes; he was thinking of his isolation, his hopeless future, and of Muttroo's suggestion.

'Will the sahib tell me something?' she said with hesitation; and he nodded absently. 'It is this: I seek to worship the God of the Christians —the sahib's God. But I know not how to set about it. If I understood how to approach the God of whom the white padre spoke He would perhaps preserve and protect me, and then even in the darkness I should have no fear of the wrath of Kali.'

'What are you saying?' he inquired.

She repeated her words. His recent imaginings flew from his brain like a flock of birds disturbed by the casting of a stone.

'The padre-people would tell you all that,' he said shortly.

'But what is there to know save the name which I heard but have forgotten? And the best manner of propitiation? And how to avoid disfavour? Does He delight in sacrifice, or offerings of flowers, or rice, or money? I have so little that I can give,' she added wistfully, 'and so perhaps He will be angered and permit Kali to destroy me after all.'

Stephen fidgeted with British embarrassment at the mention of religion, and began to wish he had

not encouraged Sunia to talk; but the appealing eyes held him, and forced an unwilling answer from his lips.

'Kali is nothing,' he said awkwardly; 'you need not fear any Hindu idol — they are all nothing. There is only one God.'

'And the name, sahib—the name?' she urged with excitement.

He waited a moment, turning his eyes from her eager face.

'The name is Christ,' he said quietly.

'Ka-liste,' she repeated, and whispered the word again to herself, as though fastening it in her memory. 'And concerning offerings?'

'They are not required. You must just be a good girl and not tell lies, and help other people. Now I have talked enough,' he said in desperation, 'and I am tired. You must go.'

He waved his hand towards the door, and she got up obediently, though with a little cloud of disappointment in her eyes. At the threshold she stopped and salaamed, and then went softly out. Stephen moved impatiently, and gave a short laugh.

'By Jove! that settles the business,' he said aloud; 'the missionaries win.'

CHAPTER IX

AN unexpected solution of Stephen's difficulty concerning the disposal of Sunia presented itself the following evening in the shape of an invitation to Loo Larken's marriage with Mr. Alfred Skinner. It was accompanied by a characteristic letter from the bride elect, which explained that, owing to the sudden promotion and transfer of her *fiancé* to a distant province, she had reluctantly yielded to overwhelming persuasions from all sides to be married at once.

'But think,' she wrote, 'how dull! Alfred cannot get more than two days' leave, so I have had to come down to Pari while all my friends are enjoying themselves up-hill. I meant to have had a grand wedding in Mussourrie, with rickshaws for the bridesmaids and myself, and a tiffin at the best hotel. Now, no time to get a trousseau, the wedding-dress made in a hurry, and to be married in the Mission Church in the bazaar by Mr. Tod, the missionary, because there is no proper church here, or even a railway-station, the place is so small and unimportant. There will not be enough guests to make things lively, and none of my young lady friends will leave the hills at this time of year to

come down and be bridesmaids. It will not be a real wedding at all. But Alfred has got a good appointment offered him, and he could not take any leave for a year or perhaps longer, so we have to be married now or wait. Of course, I would prefer to wait; but they all cried out and made such a fuss till I had to give in, and now they are all pleased except Sue, who hates being down in Pari after the hills. She is very cranky, and has posted an invitation to the wedding to Mr. Green, though Mr. Rennie said must not ask a subordinate, so I hope you will leave him behind and come yourself.'

'Married by Mr. Tod the missionary,' repeated Stephen to himself. And he reflected that if he accepted the invitation and went to the wedding he could explain Sunia's situation to this padre, who, scenting an easy convert, would probably make no difficulty about providing for the girl. The wedding was fixed for a week hence; his leg would be quite well by that time, and the little change would do him good.

Then he remembered that, owing to the officiousness of Sue Larken, Mr. Green had also been invited, and that it was not advisable for them both to be absent at the same time, with the rains expected at any moment. He made up his mind that Green must be sacrified and Sue Larken disappointed, and he hardened his heart next morning when he beheld the little man strutting across the compound with a sheaf of papers in his hand. The jauntiness of his bearing seemed to Stephen to indicate that he anticipated no difficulty in obtaining leave for the wedding.

He continued his consequential progress past the servants' houses and into the middle of the compound, where he paused in an interested attitude. Dare wondered what he was looking at, and then into the picture framed by the open doorway of the bungalow came Sunia, with a brass vessel poised on her shapely head, her body held easily erect from the swaying hips, and one arm curved, the sun catching its warm brown tint, as her hand held the shining lota steady.

Mr. Green stopped her and spoke. She laughed shyly, and Stephen caught the momentary flash of her white teeth. She moved on, and the man reached the steps of the veranda, where Muttroo, somewhat pale and shaky after his sharp attack of fever, was busily brushing his master's clothes. The staccato voice of the subordinate penetrated into the bungalow as he spoke to the old bearer in Hindustani fluent as that of a native.

'That woman'—with a wave of his hand towards the retreating figure of the girl—'is she a syce's wife or what?'

'She is the half-niece of Sham Lal, the watchman,' replied Muttroo grumpily.

'I asked her but now where she lived, and she said here in this compound. How is that?'

'Sham Lal has driven her from his house, and the sahib, in his kindness, permitted her for the time being to seek shelter here.'

'Oh, oh! in his kindness!' laughed Mr. Green, who was not at all above gossiping with a native when there was no European to observe him. He

forgot on this occasion that he stood exactly in a line with the open door of Stephen's room. 'Perhaps she was the coolie woman in the veranda that night—h'n? And the sahib may not have been so *behosh* after all? Well, he has got good taste.'

'The sahib's intention is to send the girl to a mission-khana when he can make the arrangement,' said Muttroo, with severity.

'Oh! If she wants some place to go to there is *my* compound, you know. You can tell her so if you like, from me. She would find it more amusing than any padre-khana, I think. Ha, ha!—h'n?'

Stephen felt a wave of fierce, primitive jealousy surge within him. It astonished and alarmed him, and he fought it down; but when Mr. Green came in and proffered his request for a fortnight's leave to include the wedding at Pari and a visit to Cawnpore, he granted it without hesitation. If either of them stayed behind now it should not be Mr. Green, and a letter to Mr. Tod, the missionary, would answer the purpose quite as well as an interview. He wrote the letter then and there, giving himself no time for consideration.

The answer arrived a few days later, when Mr. Green had started, and Stephen was limping about at his usual work, feeling fretful and exhausted, and on the worst of terms with life in general. The missionary's letter was written on the flimsiest of paper, closely lined, and with a pen-nib that must have resembled a tin-tack, judging by the rents in the pages and the thread-like appearance of the hand-

writing. It set forth in somewhat laboured language that he himself would come to Nandi as soon after Miss Larken's wedding as the exigencies of his work would permit, and bring away the heathen girl to join his flock. It continued with an injunction to the Almighty to preserve Mr. Stephen Dare and his family, if he were blessed with the same, and concluded: 'Yours prayerfully, Abel Tod.'

So, perhaps, in less than a week Sunia would be gone. Stephen had only seen her in the distance since she had sat by his bed and waved the fan, and sung, and asked her embarrassing little questions.

Once, the first time he went out, she was busy weeding in the garden, and he avoided that part of the compound. Later, when he came in, he found an odd, tight little nosegay of yellow and orange marigolds on his table, and though he disliked the pungent scent of the flower, he put them in a vase and let them stay there till Muttroo threw them away.

Another time she was drawing water, and he watched her afterwards move across the compound carrying the vessel on her head; and on the evening when the missionary's letter arrived he saw her sitting at the threshold of Muttroo's house assisting the old bearer's wrinkled, gray-haired wife to grind corn—a scene that forcibly suggested the Scriptural 'two women grinding at the mill.'

Sunia was singing at her work, and the sound of her voice drew him till he found himself making excuses to visit the stables, from whence he could watch her, and listen, without her knowledge. The sweet, rich voice rose and fell in a plaintive minor

key, while the whir-r-r of the mill-stone ground out a monotonous accompaniment.

'The song of the mill-stone, I suppose,' thought Stephen smiling. He tried to follow the words, that were probably many centuries old, with their quaint metaphor and flavour of Oriental fatalism. And he wondered, as he listened, whether Sunia grasped their meaning or merely sang like a parrot without understanding.

'The mill that crushes grain between the stones
Turns, as the world that grinds the life of man,
And circles, ever deaf to prayers and moans,
The purpose unrevealed, and dim the plan.

'The gods alone the secret know, but still
Men strive and struggle, ever asking why,
As in the past they strove, and as they will
For ever ask, and ever asking—die.'

Presently the old woman rose, which brought the song and the corn-grinding to an end. Sunia stood up, and, yawning, clasped her hands behind her head and leaned against the door-post. The slender perfection of her outline showed in graceful curves against the dark interior of the hut, and she seemed to be gazing with a pensive gravity out across the flat unbroken plain that stretched beyond the mud walls of the compound.

Sally, who had been engaged in chasing squirrels to pass away the unconscionable time her master was pleased to spend in the stables, now picked her way gingerly up to the door of Muttroo's hut and barked at Sunia. The girl shifted her position and

held out an ingratiating hand, but the dog drew back, barked again with insolence, and moved away with a contemptuous hitch of her hind-quarters. Sally had no opinion of natives, male or female, and she only tolerated the servants inside the house because there appeared to be no way of doing without them. For the same reason she graciously allowed the dog-boy to comb, wash, and feed her, but she never made friends with him, as did Pluck and Slipper, who were neither fastidious nor discriminating.

Stephen noted the little scene, and it awoke within him a gnawing unrest, because in a degree he understood and sympathized with the dog's prejudice where natives were concerned. He himself was one of the multitude of Europeans in India who can never feel themselves in touch with Eastern life, and the gulf between black and white seemed to him unbridgable. There are many who, speaking from years of experience and study, would say that he was virtually right. That the West can never truly interpret the East, because by origin and inheritance he two have nothing in common; because thought, belief, speech, manner of feeding, living, marrying, and dying are all totally and fundamentally different. And though there are some who, possibly from susceptible temperament, or a far-off strain of Oriental descent, may succeed in throwing a plank across the chasm, it is the Western who has to venture over to the other side, for there is never a meeting half way.

Stephen was essentially Western, and also conscious

of the fact. The Anglo-India he had known before he came to Nandi had attracted and contented him, as it must almost invariably please the average English youth beginning life, who appreciates the friendliness, the gaiety, the equality of society, and the easy opportunities of amusement without heavy expense. But India in reality—India vast, mighty, mysterious, lonely in spite of her teeming populations, old in a Wisdom that the West has never learned—held for him no fascination.

Now he stood in the close-smelling stables, with Jane showing the whites of her eyes at him over the stall-bar, and Sally fussing up triumphant after her demonstration of disdain for the native woman who had dared to be familiar, and gazed, as Sunia was still doing, out over the plain beyond the compound, with trouble in his eyes. He was realizing slowly, and with dismay, that the girl's race and colour had no longer the power to lessen her attraction for him. She was 'of no account,' 'the low-born niece of a Hindu watchman,' a village girl of the people, just one of the millions of black humanity working out a weak existence in this huge, relentless country; and yet, with every nerve and breath, he wanted to keep her near him. He dreaded and resented the coming of the missionary; he yearned, with a fierce, overwhelming passion, to follow Muttroo's suggestion. He had no delusion as to the nature of his feeling; he knew that had he been leading a less isolated existence he should never have thought of her, and that had she not possessed the beauty and grace of a wild creature, the gift of her Northern

blood, the notion of her would have repelled him. Mentally he condemned himself with helpless rage because he could think of her as a native at all without repugnance.

He longed for some distraction to lift his imagination from the subject that was clogging his mind and judgment. If only some cheery fellow would come along to whom he could open his heart, who would slap him on the back and say, 'My dear chap, start the little baggage off with the parson the moment he comes, and in a week you will forget all about her. You're hipped, you know. It's best to leave natives alone. Come for a sprint across country before dinner, and afterwards we will play picquet till bed-time. . . .'

But at Nandi there was little hope of anything but loneliness unbroken at this time of year, and Stephen left the stables to wander haltingly towards the river, impelled by a vague notion that the sight and sound of the water might soothe his inquietude, and help him to view matters in their proper perspective.

Moody and depressed, he stood on the aqueduct, and saw dark masses of purple clouds gathering on every side, seamed at intervals with wrinkled threads of green lightning. For the past few days the sky had been overcast, the air stifling, and the atmosphere charged with a sense of expectant pause. It is the most enervating time of all the year in India, this sultry interval just before the rains. Even under the best conditions—large, cool houses, plenty of ice, thermantidotes in every room, and long even-

ing drives over well-watered roads—it is almost unendurable to Europeans. To Stephen Dare at Nandi, with indifferent alleviations and no distractions, it seemed as if the infernal regions could hardly be worse.

But the longed-for rain must be very near—perhaps the first downpour would come that night; and, if it continued, the Rev. Abel Tod, who was probably no horseman, would have a disagreeable journey of thirty miles, most of the route from Pari being practically roadless. It was possible that his coming would be delayed, and the idea gave Stephen an unwilling satisfaction.

Two more days crawled by, and still the rain had not fallen. It hung low in the bulging clouds, a weighty, plum-coloured mass, pressing down the atmosphere till the heat was well-nigh audible; a damp, sticky, tingling heat, from which there was no escape, no hiding-place.

And now a dreaded monster began to awake and stir. Cholera had appeared in the villages further up the river bank, and a traveller resting for the night at Nandi fell a victim to the disease he carried with him. Since then other deaths had occurred, and this morning the news was brought to 'the sahib' that Sham Lal the watchman had been taken ill at midnight, and had died before the sun was fully risen. To-night, as Stephen sat at his dinner-table, he listened to the cries of the mourners for the dead echoing across the river in faint, melancholy wails.

He knew that with pestilence in the air, it was

the wiser part to eat and drink, and he tried to compel himself to swallow some glutinous soup, and portions of a grilled chicken that little more than an hour ago had been running about the compound. But the food quickly became tepid from the swaying of the punkah; his drink seemed warm and flat; and finally, in disgust, he bade Muttroo clear the things away, and rose to seek his pipe and tobacco. Lizards were darting over the white-washed walls, licking down the insects that crowded about the lamps hung out of range of the punkah draught; small, winged bugs defiled the air and everything they touched; stag-beetles with horny coverings banged and boomed round the room. Sally lay on her side in the doorway panting. Mosquitos screamed in millions beneath the chairs and tables and in the corners of the room, and he was forced to protect his feet and legs with a rug that he might be able to sit still. He tried to read an art magazine, sent to him by his mother that mail, because in it Mr. de Vitre's pictures were mentioned, and he turned over the leaves in a listless endeavour to fix his attention. But the close, heavy stillness, broken only by distant growls of thunder and the wailing from the village, pressed upon his nerves till he could have shouted aloud in a frenzy.

He rose, threw aside the rug and magazine, and went to the door. Almost as if it had been lying in wait for him a flash of lightning blazed into his eyes, and in quick succession followed flash upon flash, till the compound was as light as day. The thunder

roared and crackled, and then suddenly the rain splashed down like a sheet of water thrown violently from a vast vessel. The thunder came and went, and presently in the intervals of its deafening rolls, and louder than the rush of the rain, the clamorous croaking of myriads of frogs went up hoarsely from the low land by the river without falter, pause, or variation. In regular beat and unison rose the song from millions of little throats, as though organized and conducted by the leading musician of a vast orchestra.

Stephen sat out in the veranda till nearly midnight, drawing the damp air into his dry lungs with relief. Gradually the thunder ceased, and the rain became less violent, falling now with a steady monotonous hiss, with which the frogs' chorus kept untiring pace.

There was no movement in the compound, but here and there a light from the row of servants' houses glimmered mistily through the rain, and as Stephen sat trying to make up his mind to go inside to bed, he suddenly noticed a speck of flame in the distance that was undoubtedly moving nearer. He wondered who could be coming from the village on such a night, and he waited expectant as the tiny light came on towards the bungalow, wavered at the edge of the compound, and then halted by the stables.

'Is anyone there?' shouted a sing-song voice in Hindustani. It brought an answering cry from the bearer's house, and, after a pause, a second lantern joined the new arrival. The two lights approached

the veranda with a murmur of voices, and Stephen, peering out into the darkness to meet them, saw Muttroo, with his head and shoulders protected by a brown blanket, walking in front of a tall, thin Englishman, who wore a shabby black suit and a sodden sun-helmet.

CHAPTER X

'THE padre-sahib has arrived,' announced Muttroo, kicking off his shoes as he mounted the veranda steps.

The missionary followed, and, setting down his lantern, stood with the water streaming from his hat and beard while Stephen expressed concern and astonishment, and gave orders to Muttroo to rouse the other servants and prepare food and a room for the dripping guest.

'I thought I should just have got here before the rain began,' said Mr. Tod, entering the bungalow with Stephen, and leaving pools of water to mark his progress; 'but I entirely lost my bearings, and really only struck Nandi village by accident. I borrowed a lantern there, and so was able to make my way on here. I am sorry, indeed, to disturb you at such a late hour.'

The man's face and voice were weary, and he sat down heavily in the nearest chair.

'How did you come—ride or drive? Where's your horse?' asked Stephen.

'Oh, I walked.'

'*Walked?* Thirty miles—and in all that mugg heat! You must be dog tired.'

The other smiled indifferently.

'I am well used to it. I do all my itinerating on foot; it saves money that is sorely needed for other purposes, and also it seems to me more consistent with my calling than to travel in comfort.'

'I hope you won't be knocked up. Will you go into my room and change into some of my clothes? My bearer will look after you, and then you must have something to eat. When did you leave Pari?'

'Early this morning, or yesterday morning I suppose it must be by now. I had two rests in villages by the way. It was a good opportunity to read to the people, so the time was not wasted.' He took from a brown canvas knapsack, that hung from a strap over his shoulder, a Hindi Bible and Prayer-Book, and examined their damp condition with concern. 'Walking became difficult after I lost the track, and then the rain and the darkness made it worse. I own that I am tired, and I shall be very grateful for some dry clothes and food and a rest.'

Stephen conducted him into the side room where Muttroo was unearthing garments from a tin-lined box, and by the time the missionary reappeared, wrapped in a suit that was ludicrously large for his spare, narrow figure, a meal was already on the table, prepared with that swiftness of resource in a culinary emergency which is the special talent of the Indian cook.

The host regarded his guest with interested curiosity while the latter ate and drank. The plentiful brown hair, untouched with gray, the white, even teeth, and smooth forehead would seem to belong to

a man of little more than thirty; but the face, with its prominent cheek-bones, long, narrow nose and deeply-sunken eyes, held a mature self-confidence and fierce tenacity of purpose, which is sometimes to be seen in the countenances of venerable ecclesiastics, and this made his age difficult to determine. His eyes expressed indomitable will, courage, perseverance; but he gave the impression that the whole of his energies were concentrated and directed towards a single end and aspiration. And, indeed, the missionary lived for but one aim and purpose, one thought, one dream, one resolve—the saving of souls.

Stephen wondered with a sharp regret what Sunia's life would be amongst the band of native Christians at Pari. Looking at their pastor, it was easy to imagine the hold he must possess over the wills and personalities of his converts; how he must cling to their weak souls as a ferret clings to the neck of a rabbit—fiercely tenacious, inflexible, never loosening, never failing. Dare felt instinctively that there was no taint of hypocrisy in the padre's mind or thoughts; but he also felt that such a man, in the middle ages, might have persecuted the heretic, bound him to the stake, tortured from him a confession of Christ, and then have knelt to thank God with honest fervour that he had done his all to save a soul.

Mr. Tod ate his food quickly, and in silence. When he had finished he said Grace with earnest simplicity, the words falling from his lips clear, reverent, unhurried.

'And now about this outcast girl,' he began, as he left the table. 'I understand that she is a widow, and was badly used by her people, as, alas! is so often the case. That she committed some outrage in the village temple, and incurred the anger of her family, so came here for protection?'

'Yes; her uncle threatened to kill her. The man is dead now. Cholera has got into the village, and he died of it yesterday. But I don't suppose she'd be any better off with the rest of the family, even if she would go back to them, or if they would take her. She's without home, or people, or caste, and it seemed the best thing to do to hand her over to some mission.'

'Is she eager to become a Christian?'

'I—I think she wants to. She heard someone preach in Nandi village once, and she seems to have remembered something about it. But her ideas must be pretty hazy.'

'*Ah!*'—the missionary's eyes glowed with enthusiasm—'I recollect noticing a bright, intelligent girl who was thirsting for the Truth when I itinerated there last year. I gave her a Hindi Bible. The good seed! the good seed!'

'Her uncle burnt the Bible,' said Stephen, recalling the words Sham Lal had spoken on the canal bank many weeks ago.

'No matter; the bread I cast on the waters has returned to me.'

'I'm afraid we shall have some trouble when it comes to taking her away.'

'Why?'

'Oh, she likes being here. She weeds and does odd jobs, and helps my old bearer and his wife, who are kind to her. She's not very keen on going.'

'Then why not allow her to stay? If really needful, I could spare the time from my duties at Pari to give her a right understanding of the truth, and then baptize her. She might be the means of leading others in this compound into the right path.'

'No, no; that wouldn't do at all,' said Stephen hastily.

Mr. Tod regarded him with stern pity.

'I fear you are one of the many who have a mistaken prejudice against native Christian servants,' he said, with an obvious endeavour to speak temperately. 'However, I have no desire to run counter to your wishes, and I am confident I shall be able to persuade the girl to come with me. I will go to bed now, if you will allow me, as I want to be early in the village to preach and speak with the people. Many of them, I think, will welcome the message again.'

'You're not afraid of cholera? There have been a good many deaths in the last two days.'

'Poor lost creatures, to die in sin without knowledge of the Light! I only trust that to-morrow I may have the blessed privilege of saving some of the departing souls from the blackness of idolatry. I shall be out the greater part of the day, for I want to visit a village further up the river bank, where last year I converted and baptized a promising youth; but I fear his spiritual strength may have

failed him. When I return I will see the girl, and she must be ready to start with me the following morning. I will hire a cart from the village for her to travel in. It is an expense I can fairly charge to the mission under the circumstances.'

'I hope you will eat a good breakfast before you start to-morrow. It isn't safe to go into the midst of an epidemic with an empty stomach,' suggested Stephen rather irritably, for he reflected that it would be anything but pleasant if the missionary, in his zeal, brought cholera back to the bungalow. 'And you'd better wear my clothes, and keep your own dry to go back in. It will probably pour to-morrow again.'

'Perhaps,' said Mr. Tod carelessly. 'I will gratefully follow your suggestion as to breakfast and the clothes. No; I won't take food with me,' as Stephen mentioned sandwiches; 'I will beg some milk and chupattis of the villagers, if I am hungry. The people are generally willing, if not anxious, to give.'

'They have an idea charity brings them luck,' said Stephen, with unintentional cynicism, and he received an icy good-night from Mr. Tod in consequence.

They shook hands, and retired to opposite sides of the bungalow; and a little later, notwithstanding the distance that separated them, and the noise of the frogs and crickets outside, the loud and fervent praying of the missionary reached Stephen's ears as he lay wakeful and restless, questioning how the little native girl would take it when she understood

that her happy days in the compound were positively over.

He pictured her distress and fear, her tears and supplications, and his mind shrank from the prospect of the painful scene of her departure. All the tender compassion and generosity of a sportsman's nature towards the weak and helpless now rose within him in protest against the forcing of her into a life that must be lonely and uncongenial at first, however much she might ultimately benefit by the change. And Stephen did not feel entirely convinced that benefit would necessarily follow, considering the wild independence of her nature.

He fidgeted angrily, resenting the whole affair from beginning to end. He wished he had never seen Sunia. He regretted he had written to the padre. He told himself defiantly that he might just as well have allowed matters to slide on to their inevitable conclusion; who would have been the wiser or the worse? The girl would have been happy, and he himself would have had something to console him in the dreary emptiness of his present life, and equally cheerless future.

He attempted to review his feelings with regard to her. She had attracted him strangely from the moment he had found her sleeping on the river bank. How vividly he remembered the scene! The sinking sun, the graceful, unconscious figure, the scented air, the whispering water. Then, at first, the fact of her being a native, and the thought, unsolid though its foundation, of Georgie Dalison had outweighed the temptation; but the latter had

gathered fierceness and intensity, till the protecting counter-weights had lost their value. At this point there had arisen the unexpected moral reluctance, which had battled with natural inclination, and now he began to wonder, though he lay aghast at the notion, if he were not coming perilously near to actual love for the little creature.

* * * * *

In the morning the rain ceased, the sun shone mistily through the clouds, and the country was magically overspread with a tint of tender green. The missionary had already started when Stephen awoke, and he decided that, as his guest was likely to be absent the greater part of the day, he might as well ride up the canal bank and clear off inspection work that had fallen into arrears since his accident. Muttroo detained him when he went out to mount the white pony.

'The girl Sunia is almost without sense by reason of the coming of the padre-sahib,' he grumbled. 'She knows that he has come to take her away—what else?—and for hours has she wept and lamented. Only by force have we withheld her from seeking thine Honour's presence. There will be a great disturbance when the time comes for her to go.'

Stephen's heart smote him for the child's grief.

'I will see her this afternoon,' he said. 'The padre-sahib and I will make her understand all about it.'

He started, not daring to look towards the doorway from whence, as he passed, came a piteous little sound of woe.

The clouds and the moisture made it possible for

him to stay out later than usual, and he hoped that he should find Mr. Tod in the bungalow by the time he returned; but when he came back to his mid-day breakfast the padre was still absent, and afterwards he settled himself in a long chair with a cheroot, apprehensive that at any moment Sunia might rush in and fall at his feet pleading for mercy.

He was relieved when at last Mr. Tod appeared, still a grotesque object in borrowed clothes, weary and exhausted, but uplifted with an ecstatic triumph at the success which had rewarded his efforts.

'They asked me, some of the people, why I did not come oftener. One old man wept with joy when he saw me and said: "Now once more shall we hear the good words of Issa (Jesus)." Oh'—he flung out his arms—'to have saved a soul, even one soul from the blackness of idolatry! To drag it from the foul depths of the mire, and to wash it pure and clean with the truth——'

'I suppose the cholera's pretty bad,' interrupted Stephen. 'It's awful not to be able to help the poor wretches. I haven't got any of the right medicines, though I have sent for some stuff, and ten to one when it does come they won't look at it. I've reported the matter officially, but every little outlying village can't be considered, and probably the epidemic will die out as quickly as it started.'

'A year seldom passes without an outbreak in this district. The people accept the scourge as Fate, and make no fight, attempt no alleviation. I sat with one poor man to-day until he died; he

said his end had been written on his forehead from his birth. He refused to let me baptize him, and would not hear the words of holy comfort. He died with the name of a heathen god on his lips; and I had failed—I had failed!'

His eyes grew tragic and his lips twitched.

He refused food, saying he was not hungry, and suggested that his interview with the girl-widow should take place without further delay.

'I had better see her here in the veranda,' he said, 'provided you have no objection.'

'Certainly. The servants' quarters are so stuffy.'

'I should never notice that. But I think for the girl's own sake she had better come here. The publicity of the compound might distract her attention.'

So Sunia was summoned, and came across the open space with bent head and hanging arms, while Stephen remained inside the room, and the missionary took up his position in the veranda armed with the Hindi Bible. He spoke the vernacular with ease, from long practice and severe study. His tone was gently authoritative as he asked the girl if she desired to become a Christian. Stephen could not see her from where he sat, and he was glad of it. He listened intently for her answer.

'Yes, Huzoor,' she said, in a sobbing little voice; 'and I pray to Ka-liste. Daily do I pray to Him and make obeisance, and no longer do I fear the wrath of Kali, for the sahib hath told me that the gods of my people are naught. There is only one God.'

She spoke hurriedly as though to parade her knowledge, and Stephen knew she was endeavouring to prove that she had no more to learn, that she stood in no need of mission teaching.

'It is well,' said Mr. Tod; 'and when you return with me to the mission-school at Pari will you promise to do as you are bid, and be lowly, meek, and industrious?'

'Protector of the Poor'—Stephen pictured the little hands clasped imploringly—'there is no need for me to go to the mission-khana. I can sew, and I can sing, and I know that, without doubt, the one true God is Ka-liste. What more is necessary?'

'You must be baptized, and learn to read the Word, that you may understand, and teach to others, the wonderful Truth that has been revealed to you.'

Sunia began to cry.

'I do not wish to leave Nandi, and the sahib, and Muttroo, and Muttroo's wife. If I go away where I can never see the face of my lord, the sahib, or hear his voice, how shall I live?'

'Listen!' said the missionary sternly. 'Such words must not be spoken. Remember that it is the sahib's wish that you should go, that he wrote in his kindness and asked me to take you because he knew that it would be for the welfare of your soul and body. To-morrow, at daybreak, you will be ready to start. A cart has been ordered for you to travel in, for the way is rough and long, and rain will fall again soon.'

There was a rush and a swirl of petticoats. The

blind was flung aside, and Sunia dashed into the room, ran to the side of Stephen's chair, and knelt, hiding her face against his knee.

'I will not go! I will not go!' she cried.

Mr. Tod followed, calm and deliberate.

'She appears unwilling,' he said; 'but so often the first step is a difficulty to them. They fear the venture into the unknown. She will be reasonable once she is safe within the fold.' He bent and laid his hand on the dark head, that was shaking with sobs. 'Listen, daughter: have courage, and the Lord will grant you strength. The first step is hard, but not so hard as for many others, who, for Christ's sake, suffer bitter persecution from their kindred, or who are forced to part for ever from their home and loved ones. The Saviour is waiting. He loves and will care for you, and though there may be trials for the time, joy comes in the end for the true believer.'

The words were put into very simple village patois, and rang with earnest persuasion.

Sunia clasped her hands about Stephen's knees, and, lifting her head, looked into his face with beseeching adoration. The blood raced through his body. He longed to rise and cry with reckless impulse to the padre, 'You shall go back alone. She belongs to me, and I will keep her.'

But the light of pursuit had kindled in the other man's eyes. Here was a soul to be fought for, a race with Satan to be hardly won. The fixity of will and purpose that glowed from his face—that seemed to breathe from his very person—held

Stephen silent, who waited, feeling an excited curiosity as to what was about to happen.

'Is there any reason,' said Mr. Tod, gazing at him intently, 'why she wishes to remain with you? Is there any cause for her attachment?'

'Good Heavens!' burst out Stephen, rising and putting the girl aside. 'Should I have written and asked you to take her away if there had been?' He looked at the figure crouched against the wall. 'Don't cry, Sunia,' he said gently. 'It is right that you should go with the padre-sahib.'

'I will not go! I will not go!' she screamed. 'Sahib, thou art my father and my mother, my God and my people. Naught else matters to me. While I can look upon thy face and hear thy voice do I live, and my heart beats; away from thee shall I die! Have pity, Huzoor, have pity! Send me not away!'

She crawled again to his feet.

'Shame!' cried the missionary, in a terrible voice.

Stephen turned on him abruptly.

'Look here,' he said, 'this is all rot. I don't mind telling you, now it has come to plain speaking, that I'd give a lot to keep that girl here. Something —many things—goodness knows what—has made me hold out so far and write to you, and I'll still do what I can to make her go. I won't stand in the way of what seems best for her.' He stooped, and, taking her hands, raised her to her feet. She was still trembling with the violence of her emotion. 'Sunia, listen: I want you to go away with the padre-sahib. Will you do this to please me?'

She answered slowly and as though dazed.

'Is it truth, then, that the sahib wishes me gone?'

'Yes.'

She looked at him for a long moment with an expression that Stephen had seen in Sally's eyes when once he had punished her unjustly. It was the reproach of wounded gratitude, of a passionate attachment rejected, and it cut through his heart.

'Then I go,' she said at last.

With a deliberate, ceremonious salaam she turned and left the room. Stephen made a sudden movement to follow her, but the missionary laid a detaining hand on his arm.

'Wait,' he said. 'You have done well. Through you as His instrument has the Lord worked to this end. Hearken not unto Satan, but rejoice that we have saved a soul.'

Stephen shook off the other's touch impatiently, and began to fill his pipe with feverish attention. For a few minutes there was silence. Then the missionary threw himself on his knees, his eyes tightly closed, his long, Calvinistic face upraised, his hands clasped, his lips moving. Dare stood and watched him furtively before passing out into the veranda.

He scanned the compound with anxiety. Sunia must be inside the bearer's house, perhaps already making preparations for her journey. No; there she was, moving quickly along the canal bank. Where was she going? Surely not to the village to take leave of Sham Lal's family? Cholera was in every other house. He must stop her. He ran

hatless down the veranda steps and crossed the low mud boundary. Some distance ahead the slim white figure flitted along lightly, as though the feet barely touched the ground. She was now on the canal bank, making towards the river. A sudden suspicion clutched his mind. As he ran he remembered the words she had used:

'Is it truth that the sahib wishes me gone? . . . Then I go.'

But she had never said that she would go with the padre, and now something told Stephen that she meant to leave him in her own way. He raced towards the river swiftly, madly. He almost fancied he heard the splash of her body in the swollen waters.

'The river brought her to me,' was the thought that swayed in his mind—'the river shall not take her away.'

* * * * *

The missionary prayed on, insensible to time and surroundings. Now and then words, and even sentences, burst unconsciously from his lips. His whole being was merged into an ardent behest that he might be shown the right way to reclaim this wayward soul. He prayed for Stephen, that the young man might be granted strength and courage to purge his thoughts from evil, and turn to the only true happiness here, in this lonely spot, where religion should compensate for all drawbacks. He entreated that he himself might be sufficiently thankful for his own blessings and opportunities, might never faint by the way, might successfully fight with

Satan till the end. And his body rocked as though hardly equal to the strain of such extreme spiritual tension.

The punkah was being pulled in careless jerks; a gray squirrel crept cautiously under the long blind, hesitated, then pranced with lively audacity across the room and out at the opposite door; clouds heavy with another deluge had begun to darken the sky, and a fretful wind wandered through the bungalow. Still the absorbed, enraptured figure knelt, murmuring and swaying, till at last the man's physical strength failed him, and he fell forward dizzy and exhausted with his own fervour. Half fainting, he dragged himself to the long cane chair, and on it presently Stephen found him lying in a state of collapse.

Dare, himself pale and dishevelled, at first failed to notice the pitiable condition of the missionary. It merely seemed to him that Mr. Tod was resting. He strode towards the figure on the chair.

'The girl meant to drown herself,' he began, in abrupt resentment, 'and I was only just in time to stop her. Now, I have come to tell you that I mean her to stay here. I have made up my mind she's to stay here.'

He rapped the back of his right hand sharply on the palm of his left. He had hurried into the bungalow beside himself with emotion, defiant of moral sentiments, reckless of consequences, to make the padre comprehend that nothing in heaven or earth should prevent him from keeping the girl at Nandi, and that no principle, consideration, or prejudice, should interfere with his determination.

He had carried Sunia in his arms up from the river, he had kissed the soft little face, stilled her terror, scolded her gently, told her that she was his, and that she should never go away from him. He had listened, clasping her close, while with Eastern exaggeration and abandonment she had cooed her adoration into his ear. He could feel her cheek against his neck now.

Mr. Tod opened his eyes, and Stephen was chilled with a sudden perception of the man's pallor and weakness.

'Hulloa! are you feeling seedy?' he inquired, with grudging concern.

'I am afraid I am ill,' was the whispered reply.

'I say—I'm awfully sorry! Let me get you some brandy?'

'No, thank you. I am—a total abstainer.'

'Never mind, take it as medicine——'

'No!'

'What bosh!'

Mr. Tod made an effort to raise his voice.

'So it may appear to you,' he said hoarsely; 'but, though at this moment my body craves for a spoonful of stimulant, it would be sin for me to take it, because I should be defying my conscience.'

His voice failed again at the end of the sentence. His cheeks looked more hollow, his eyes deeper sunk than ever, and his nostrils had a blue, nipped appearance. Stephen felt an unwilling respect for the man's rigid adherence to his principles, the while he could have shaken him for this narrow conception of his duty.

'Then you must have some tea or coffee at once. You look absolutely played out. Why didn't you go in for a good solid meal after messing about all that time in the village——' He stopped suddenly, a dread possibility entering his mind. 'Look here, Mr. Tod,' for the padre's eyes had closed and a spasm of suffering distorted his features, 'you had much better get into bed for a bit, and have something hot to drink. You'll soon be all right if you cave in at once.'

Mentally, he ransacked his medicine chest, all the time fatally aware that it was devoid of remedies for cholera.

The hours that followed, lived confusedly in Stephen's memory. First came the difficult process of getting the sick man, helpless from pain and weakness, into his bed. A messenger was sent to fetch Gopal Dass and the necessary drugs from the dispensary, five miles away. There was hasty running to and from the cook-house to the bungalow for hot water, mustard plasters, and other simple alleviations. And Stephen did his utmost to overrule the patient's obstinate refusal of stimulant in any form.

'It will not aid me,' repeated Mr. Tod, with conviction; 'I know well enough what is the matter with me, and, if I am to die, would you have me pass intoxicated into the presence of my Maker?'

At last the younger man slipped his arm beneath the now almost unconscious head, and, raising it, poured some brandy, with steady care, down the padre's throat. It was swallowed with a little

gasping struggle. Then came a rally, and until the darkness fell, bringing with it a heavy downpour, the Reverend Abel Tod fought death with natural instinct—death, in one of his most pitiless characters—and Stephen and old Muttroo toiled unceasingly to save the life that was in such deadly peril.

But the awful malady continued its work of destruction, unheeding of their efforts. Gopal Dass did not come, the messenger had not returned, the missionary's strength was ebbing fast. Muttroo brought in a lamp which he hung to a nail on the wall, and, with the acute perception of trifles that often so oddly asserts itself in times of suspense and difficulty, Stephen felt vaguely worried that the light had been hung crooked, though it never occurred to him to set it straight. The punkah was still, for the rain had lowered the temperature. The blind was rolled up, and the noise of the rain, and the frogs, and the crickets, seemed to be concentrated just outside the open door. On the low bed in the middle of the long, narrow side-room lay the figure straight and rigid, now giving but little sign of life, and Stephen felt helplessly certain that the end was very near. He hastily raised the limp head and forced more brandy between the set teeth, expecting to see it run out again down the chin. But it gurgled down the throat, and a few moments later Mr. Tod opened his eyes, while his fingers clawed feebly at the bed-clothes.

'Where is it—where is it?' he was whispering.

'What do you want?'

Stephen bent low to catch the words.

'My Bible——'

The Hindi Bible and Prayer-Book were found and placed beneath the restless fingers.

'God has called me,' he murmured, with fluttering breath, 'and I am glad to go. But—there is still so much to do—and so few to do it.' He put out a shaking hand. 'I would delay my going for just a little space——'

'Is there anything you want me to write down? Any message for anybody—any directions?'

Stephen felt that time was not to be lost if the missionary desired to entrust him with any last wishes.

A faint smile flickered over the dying face.

'My will is at Pari—very simple—everything goes to the Mission. Long ago I gave up all I had for the Mission—my home, my people, and Elizabeth Watling—I gave them all up—for the reclaiming of souls——'

The pathos of it made Stephen's heart ache. It seemed so pitiful that the man who, for the sake of his calling, had sacrificed all earthly affections, should be dying a cruel death in a comfortless canal bungalow, far out in the jungle away even from the native Christian flock that leaned on him for guidance, with no medical aid, and tended only by a stranger. Often afterwards Stephen wondered about 'Elizabeth Watling.' Had Abel Tod loved her and she him? Had she been angrily miserable when he renounced her for the Mission, or had she acquiesced in patient resignation? What had become of her?

Suddenly the padre's voice took on a strange, rasping timbre, almost as though he were speaking through a comb covered with tissue-paper.

'Quick!' he shouted, with the spurious strength of partial delirium. 'Send for the heathen woman.'

'Go and fetch Sunia,' said Stephen to Muttroo; 'wrap her in a blanket, and carry her through the rain.'

'A little water,' went on the harsh, metallic voice with difficulty. 'No—not to drink—but for baptism. Oh, Lord, give me strength to wait and complete my task! Thou knowest that I am ready and willing to come, but there is a soul—a helpless soul—that I cannot leave in danger——'

Stephen brought some water in the enamelled iron wash-hand basin; truly an incongruous font, but he was afraid to leave the room in search of a more becoming vessel. The missionary watched him, breathing quickly, with eyes that were pleading, imploring.

'Yes?' said Stephen involuntarily.

'She will be here—near you—have you strength—can you defy Satan?'

Dare was silent. Who but the most callous could bring himself to make a promise to a dying man that probably could not be kept? He knew that if he pledged his word he might never fulfil it, and he was stricken with regret that he could give the missionary no honest reassurance in his last hour.

With an immense effort the padre supported himself on his elbows. He looked terrible in the

yellow light of the wall lamp—like a corpse rising from the grave.

'I can't die,' he muttered with hoarse entreaty. 'I can't die till I am sure——'

'Don't ask me to promise,' said Stephen. 'I can't promise; I know I shouldn't be able to keep my word.'

'But there is a way—one way only—would you consent to marry her—now—here—before I die?'

There was silence. The missionary's head fell forward.

'Brandy!' he whispered.

Stephen gave it to him; and as the man lay and gasped in his arms thoughts crowded tumultuously through his brain. Could he let the padre die unsatisfied? If he did, should he ever feel quite free from the taint of remorse? It was altogether beyond him to give up Sunia now, and of what account was his life or his future? As long as he existed the de Vitre family would be dependent on him, and though on some distant day the burden might possibly lighten, his freedom could only be comparative at best. He should never be able to go home; he should never have money to spend on himself. Why, then, should he be condemned to live on at Nandi with no human interest in his life? Why deny himself a pleasure, a solace, even perhaps a comfort? He realized with a vague reluctance that such a death-bed ceremony would bind him to the native girl morally, if not legally, for ever; and he sat beside the dying man with passion tearing at his heart, and reason protesting

feebly from his brain, persuading himself that future possibilities were of no account; that the present was all he need consider.

A sound at the doorway made him turn. She was there standing on the threshold against the black background of the night. The coarse, brown blanket that Muttroo had wrapped about her lay at her feet; her face was eager, her eyes large, excited, appealing. His senses leaped to meet her. He would consent to the padre's proposal, and at least she would be his without the alloy of regret or remorse.

'She is here,' said Stephen, speaking slowly and distinctly. 'I am willing to do as you wish. Can you hear me?'

He held the wine-glass again to the white lips.

'Give me strength, O Lord. Spare Thy servant for yet one short hour——'

For a few moments Abel Tod lay and panted helplessly, while the earnest spirit fought and overcame the failing flesh. A vivid spot of colour rose in each haggard cheek, and his eyes glowed with an unearthly brilliance. He suddenly sat upright without support, and beckoned to Sunia, who looked to Stephen for instructions. The young man held out his hand, and she crept towards him timidly.

'Kneel down,' he told her, 'and say anything the padre-sahib bids you. Do not fear,' as her eyes dilated; 'you are not to be sent away.'

She knelt at his knee like a trusting child within touch of the missionary's hand. It was a strange scene—the badly-lighted room, with its bare walls,

and mere necessaries in the way of furniture, and the figure on the low, narrow bed, sitting up gaunt and determined, the fierce soul held to the exhausted body by sheer will-power; the fair young Englishman, his face strained and over-wrought, his blue eyes tense, his yellow hair falling in short, damp rings on his forehead, his mouth set grimly; and, in sharp contrast, the kneeling figure of the native girl, with nymph-like outline, and small, dark head thrown back in startled wonderment.

The missionary's voice continued, high and unnatural, repeating from memory in Hindustani the words of the baptismal service, and presently Stephen found himself standing sole sponsor to the bewildered little convert. The cross was signed on her forehead by the padre's shaking fingers dipped in the enamelled iron basin that rested on the edge of the bed. Her own name was re-given to her—Sunia, which means 'golden.'

Then rapidly, as though racing some unseen power of darkness, the marriage service was begun; but the dying man's control of consciousness was failing fast, and now the words came pouring out in English, so quickly as to be almost unintelligible. Stephen tried to recollect whether he had ever listened to them before, and wandering thoughts dominated his mind. Yes; he had been to one or two parish weddings at Daresfield. Daresfield! He should never see the place again. *His* name would never help to cover the rough stone walls of the little church. His grave would be dug in the hard, scorched soil of India; all the rest of his life

would be lived in India, with a native village woman for companion. . . . Mechanically he answered and repeated words after the missionary, who hardly waited for the echo. He made Sunia say 'Yes' to the question put abruptly to her in English; and she obeyed, parrot-wise, in blind compliance. Without attention to further detail, or pause for response, the loud, delirious voice went on; and all the time the rain pelted down outside; a dull, tapping noise told that the frogs were venturing in through the open door and hopping over the drugget; and Stephen sat motionless by the bed, his head bowed, and a little, cold, dusky hand clasped in his own.

'"Those whom God hath joined together"'—the words acted on Stephen as the sudden awakening from a dream; the padre threw up his arms—'"let no man——" Lord, I am coming—ah! do my feet pass into the kingdom.'

His hands dropped heavily, and his head fell back on to the pillow.

The work of the Rev. Abel Tod was over, and the next morning the rough country cart, that had been hired for Sunia to travel in, carried his body back to the mission-house at Pari.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

On Christmas Eve, two and a half years later, Stephen Dare was crossing the wide, barren plain that lay between the village of Nandi and the canal bungalow. Sally, grown stout and very gray about the muzzle, trotted at his heels; his gun was under his arm, and a servant followed, carrying the cartridge-bag and a game-stick, from which dangled clusters of duck, teal, and snipe. The thin, unfertile soil was here poisoned by the salty efflorescence known as 'usar,' that, drawn by the sun to the surface, showed white in irregular blotches, and crackled like hoar-frost beneath his thick shooting-boots. The air was sharp, clear, and empty of sound save for the far-off cries of water-birds from the marshy areas he had quitted; and high up across the rose-red of the sunset sky long wedges of wild-fowl winged swiftly towards more distant feeding-places for the night.

Sport had been good, and Stephen had enjoyed the day, but as he walked homewards his face wore a look of sullen vexation; for, late in the afternoon, shots other than his own had echoed over the wide stretches of water, and he had caught a glimpse of khaki-clad figures moving about the shooting-

ground, which he had come to regard as his special property. His servant told him that a party of sahibs had arrived that morning, and were encamped in a mango-grove a mile or so from Nandi. They were, he understood, Government sahibs who had posted out from the large station fifty miles away to spend their *burra din* (Christmas Day) in the jungle.

The news was depressing to Stephen. The jealousy of the sportsman was aroused, and he also shrank from a meeting with these people; dreaded having to speak with them—perhaps being obliged to invent an excuse for not accepting an invitation to dinner. For just as he had once longed for the company of his own kind, so he now recoiled from any prospect of their presence. The boyishness he had brought with him to Nandi had gone from his face and heart. He had the weary, acquiescent manner of one who has no particular object or desire in life but to be left undisturbed. He was glad that no European had succeeded Mr. Green, whose transfer orders had arrived during his absence on leave for the Larken wedding so long ago, and who had never returned to Nandi. The contents of the little bungalow on the other side of the aqueduct had been dispatched at the owner's request to meet him at his new destination, and a native subordinate was appointed in his place. Dare had even grown to hate the rare occasions on which his charge was inspected by his more senior officers, because such visits entailed a good deal of domestic inconvenience, and a certain

amount of social exertion. He was thankful that the performance of his duties was considered so satisfactory as to render prolonged or frequent invasions from the authorities unnecessary. Mr. Renny's descents he did not so much mind. The melancholy little man was silent and unsociable as himself, and the two understood one another. Joe Renny had parted with his young enthusiasm, his ambition, his vitality, on the banks of a canal, and he regarded the gradual change in his assistant with the sympathy of experience. Also he possessed private knowledge (which he ignored) concerning the occupant of the side-room in the bungalow at Nandi, and, when there, kept to his tents, making no claim to house accommodation during his fitful inspections. Sue Larken and Mrs. Renny had practically renounced camp-life since the marriage of Loo, who had been the only energetic spirit in the establishment, and they now remained inertly at headquarters, while Mr. Renny roamed his canal-banks, as much for the sake of the travelling allowance he so earned as for the benefit of his division.

The proximity of the rival sportsmen caused Stephen to feel an impatient annoyance, and he determined, with injured resignation, that he would shoot no more till they had left the neighbourhood. He did not want to meet men who came from the busy, active world, who would make him think and look back, and remind him that he could not look forward; whose talk would awaken drugged memories and ruffle the apathy of mind he had succeeded in cultivating. All he desired was to exist in his

own way without unnecessary disturbance; and surely, he now thought with pettish hostility, as though already defending himself from positive advances, he had every right to avoid his fellow-creatures if he felt so inclined. Away in the distance he could discern patches of white canvas gleaming against the solid darkness of a mango-grove. This was the camp of the enemy, and he swore mutteringly as he walked with rapid strides to reach the bungalow before the sudden fall of night.

Lamps were burning when he entered the sitting-room, and a newly-lighted wood fire roared on the low hearth. The place looked cheerful with the austere homeliness of a bachelor establishment, and the only change that might have been noticed was the absence of the photograph of Georgie Dalison from the mantelpiece.

On the centre table lay the post. The English mail was in, and a small pile of parcels and letters from the de Vitre family awaited him. His mother had sent him a pair of silk socks knitted by herself. He knew, from former experience, that they would be far too small for him, and that Muttroo would consequently annex them. She wrote to him as well—a long letter, asking if he would pay for good music-lessons for the eldest girl, who showed such marvellous talent that it was a sin it should not be developed. She deplored the approach of Christmas on account of the many extra expenses, and wondered what on earth would become of them all were it not for Stephen's unvarying kindness and generosity. Was there any chance of his getting home in the

spring? Surely it was high time he insisted on a holiday. She went on to tell him that nothing had lately been heard of Edward Dare, but she believed the old wretch was alive and well. The children had been photographed, and she enclosed copies; perhaps she had been rather extravagant in having them done so artistically, but they were such handsome boys and girls, and she so wanted Stephen to see what they were really like.

There were useless little gifts from the children to 'dear Stephen' (bought, of course, with 'dear Stephen's' money), and gaudy cards, wishing him 'A merry Christmas and a happy New Year.' He flung the packets and cards down on to the table with a grim laugh, and turned towards a thick wadded curtain, striped with blue and yellow, that hung before the doorway on his left. Sally followed him, hesitated, looked up into his face, and then returned to the rug in front of the fireplace, where she flung herself down with a sigh of resignation. A voice called to Stephen in Hindustani from behind the purdah; he lifted it, and stepped into an atmosphere that reeked of camphor, garlic, and cocoanut-oil.

Sunai was sitting cross-legged on a low bedstead that was set in a red and yellow lacquered frame. Her face had become round and full, and her body had lost its pretty curves. She had grown fat with the easy rapidity of a native in comfortable circumstances; though, according to Eastern notions, the moon face, plump limbs, and voluptuous figure would have been considered infinitely more bewitching than

the slender wild-cat grace that had made captive Stephen's senses. The bright, dark eyes, now heavy-lidded, were outlined with antimony; the fine silky hair looked wet and slippery from the constant application of various oils; and the long, straight parting was stained red with henna juice, as were also the nails and palms of her puffy little hands. Silver ornaments clanked on her wrists and ankles, hung from one nostril, and the distended lobes of her ears. Her fingers seemed covered with little blue and red rings, and she also wore large silver thumb-rings, in which were set round pieces of looking-glass. She was wrapped in a gaudy shawl, and was laughing delightedly as Stephen came into the room.

'See, my lord,' she cried, 'see the little one, how he tries to dance! Is he not a king? Behold the beauty and the strength of him. "Born but yesterday, and to-day a giant!"'

A slatternly native girl, crouched in a corner of the room, began tapping a little drum, and a tiny child, only just able to keep his uncertain balance, toddled into the middle of the floor, and attempted to twirl and stamp, native fashion, to the beat of the tom-tom. His fat little yellow body was naked, save for a short woollen shirt, thin silver bangles were half buried in the chubby flesh of his wrists and ankles, and a scarlet skull-cap was set sideways on his head that, with its thick crop of black hair, looked too large for his size.

'Nautch-o! nautch-o!' (dance! dance!) cried the enraptured mother. She clapped her hands in time to the music, if so it could be called, and sang in a

voice that was still soft and sweet, though thickened with easy living and too much rich food.

'Dance! dance! to the tom-tom beat,
Flutter of raiment and twinkling feet—
Dance till the dawn is breaking!

'Over the village the smoke hangs thick,
Drums for the wedding beat sharp and quick—
Throb till the night is ending.

Loud is the music, blinding the light,
Fever'd the air, and the song, and the sight,
Subtle the sway of the dancers.

* * * * *

'But out in the forest the fire-flies glow,
Over the jungle the stars hang low,
In the hush of the night cool-scented.'

Stephen stood over against the curtain and watched the scene with a slow smile on his face. It was all so essentially native; the badly-lighted, untidy room, the musky atmosphere, the woman seated on the bed, looking like an illustration from a Hindu story-book, and the black-eyed child making awkward little jumps to the sound of the tom-tom and his mother's voice.

After the first few months Dare had given up attempting to educate or Europeanize Sunia. He had tried to teach her to speak English, and to learn to write the alphabet, but he found that she took little interest in the lessons, and made no effort to remember them. She had no desire to learn, and what he taught her one day she had generally forgotten by the next. If he spoke to her of the

outside world, or of anything beyond her own immediate experience, she either paid no attention, or would interrupt him with questions concerning the servants, the villagers, or the animals in the compound. Any occupation that taxed her brain quickly wearied her, and she only lost her temper, or cried, if Stephen urged her to continue it. She liked to be petted and played with, to squat on her lacquered bedstead in a nest of cushions and hem long pieces of cotton material for petticoats and wrappers, to sing to 'her lord' when his work was finished, fan him when he was hot, massage his limbs when he came in tired. She would play for hours with the child, or was equally content to sit on her heels with her elbows resting on her knees and do nothing. She seemed to possess no consciousness of time, and had all the Oriental disregard for past or future.

Dare came to the final conclusion that, for both their sakes, it was wiser to leave her as she was. Her intelligence was limited; she was happy and contented, and to see her apeing English manners, knowledge, customs, would probably offend his taste far more than to witness the development of her natural native instincts. Her primitive self-satisfaction in her new circumstances had afforded him much indulgent amusement, he had delighted to gratify her small vanities and ambitions, to let her load her little person with ornaments (silver was very cheap, and Muttroo had a relative in Delhi from whom the old man procured bangles, anklets, nose and ear-rings almost at cost price), to keep a

special servant for her, and to make no demur when she elected to permanently assume the dignity of a 'Purdah Nashin' lady. The absurdity of her airs and graces under this condition was at first highly diverting. A princess of the blood could hardly have more punctiliously observed the seclusion necessary to the position. No male being save Stephen (and now the child) was ever permitted to enter her presence or behold her countenance; when she sat in her small side veranda the outer blinds of close bamboo canes were lowered; when she hired an *ekka* and drove through the village (one of her favourite pastimes) she peeped from behind frowzy red curtains, and had to be led to and from the vehicle blindly muffled in a wrapper by Tulsi, the present performer on the tom-tom.

This individual was the personal attendant and slave whom Sunia bullied and badgered with all the capricious tyranny of an Eastern sovereign, and whose fawning obedience and shameless flattery was a perpetual source of satisfaction to the mistress. Her duties were to amuse and wait upon the latter, cook her food, and clean the dwelling-room; execute commissions to the neighbouring village fairs for toys, sweetmeats, and gay clothing; look after the child, and carefully protect her lady from prying glances and inquisitive visitors. Sunia would sometimes screech abuse at the girl till she caused her to weep loudly, and on occasions (when Stephen was out of ear-shot) she would administer drastic punishment with a shoe. Again, she would be graciously condescending, and the two would squat

side by side and chew betel-nut, or share some particular native dainty served on a plate made of leaves that were pinned together with thorns or little splinters of stick.

The birth of the child had given fresh impetus to Sunia's self-importance. Having achieved the highest act of merit pertaining to Hindu womanhood, she was serenely convinced that she had risen as high in the favour and approval of her lord as she had done in her own esteem. She felt that her life was complete. She had borne a son to the sahib; she was a person of consequence, with a servant of her own, and a dwelling in the bungalow; she had more than enough to eat, and jewellery such as she had never even imagined could be hers. She grew confident and assertive, and sometimes, when thwarted by Stephen, would fly into uncontrollable passions with him.

To Dare the child's coming had brought mingled sensations. He could not but be touched by Sunia's pretty pride and delight in her motherhood, but the first sight of the little black and yellow creature had stabbed him with dismay. Then swiftly he had felt relieved, because its appearance seemed to be all of its mother and nothing of himself. Even now he looked back with aversion to the day when he had received the excited congratulations of Muttroo on the birth of his son; had endured the more patronizing attitude of the bearer's wife, who was in command of the situation; had shrunk from the little crowd of servants and followers who presented themselves in front of the bungalow with sympa-

thetic salaams and offerings of fruit and flowers; and had been sorely irritated by the many superstitious precautions insisted on by the old woman, and eagerly assented to by Sunia, to guard against the influence of evil spirits to which a new-born child and its mother are so particularly exposed.

Sunia worshipped the Christian God, and considered that she held the faith of the sahib; but with this she dexterously combined the observance of beliefs, customs, and superstitions that were hers by heritage, and that had never really lost their hold on her mind. She still entertained a lurking dread of Kali, and propitiated a little brass image of the great goddess, feeling that it was safer to insure against all possible evil. Gods were jealous people; it was as well to endeavour to please both old and new. When the child was born she decreed that he should receive no permanent name till he was past the dangerous age, when bad spirits have most control over the destinies of children, and she temporarily nicknamed him 'Maru' (worthless), in order to hoodwink the powers of evil into the belief that she set no store by the little one.

Stephen refrained from interference. He was guiltily conscious of a distinct reluctance to face the fact of his parenthood, and it caused him to stand aloof from taking part in the child's moral up-bringing. The little fellow held for him no attraction; he seemed dull and uninteresting—so preternaturally solemn that he might have been years older than his mother, who still shouted, and laughed, and played, when she could forget her

dignity. He was such a thoroughly native baby with his vacant black eyes, protruding stomach, and heavy head set on a slender stem of a neck; best let him belong to his mother's blood, he would surely be happier, less trouble, easier to provide for in the future.

Now 'Maru' continued to dance with ponderous persistence, his mother singing and applauding, his father watching him absently; Tulsi, the untidy native servant girl, strumming the tom-tom with admiring zeal, till the child suddenly grew tired and toppled over helplessly. He lay on his back and screamed, his fat legs and arms struggling in the air, while Tulsi cast aside her instrument and sprang to his assistance with ostentatious concern, loudly compassionating the untimely tumble of her 'beloved princeling.'

'Cease thy noise,' said Sunia sharply to her, 'and bring the little sahib to me.'

But 'the little sahib' chose to give trouble. He refused to be touched by Tulsi, filling the air with his shrieks, and beating and kicking with feeble spite at the face of his worshipping attendant.

'Fool that thou art!' cried Sunia exasperated; and taking off her embroidered leather slipper she flung it at the girl.

It missed her by an inch and struck the opposite wall. The child renewed his screams, and also spat at Tulsi with indescribable venom.

Stephen started forward.

'Stop the child,' he said; 'do not allow him to behave like that.'

Sunia turned on him quickly.

'What! Thou wouldst take the part of a low-born slave against thine own offspring? Shame on thee! He shall do just as it pleases him.'

The boy, emboldened by the tone of his mother's voice, again struck fiercely at the obsequious Tulsi, and screamed out a vile term of abuse which, though uttered in lisping baby tongue, was quite unmistakable.

Until now Stephen had always hastily absented himself at the first symptom of a nursery disturbance; but this evening he had witnessed a good deal more than usual, and his customary indifference was suddenly ousted by a sense of shame and disgust that a child—his child—bearing English blood in its veins should be encouraged to outrage all instincts of decency and good feeling. He strode up to the raging little boy.

'Maru,' he said sternly, 'if you cannot be good and quiet, I shall have to give you put-put (a slapping).'

The kicks and screams and spittings were promptly directed towards himself, at which Sunia laughed.

There followed the sound of a smart slap, and then silence on the part of the victim, who was dumbly gathering strength for a howl that should eclipse all previous lamentations. Sunia flung herself from the bed. She shook with passion, her eyes blazed, her face was distorted and gray with anger. Epithets, to which the term used by the child were as nothing, poured from her mouth. She became almost unrecognisable with fury. Tulsi shrank into

a corner and drew her *chudder* over her face. She had seen her mistress in many ungovernable rages, but none quite so diabolical as this. Even the child forgot his intention of surpassing his powers of noise, and stared open-mouthed at the spectacle of his mother's violence. She tore hairs from her head, beat her breast, and actually bit her own arms till the blood flowed; she threw the brass cooking-vessels across the room, rent her shawl and her clothes, and, foaming at the mouth, struck her head against the wall as though possessed of a devil.

'Sunia! Sunia!' cried Stephen, appalled at the scene.

He seized her by the wrists, holding her firmly till the paroxysm was past and the reaction had set in. Then her muscles relaxed, tears began to rain down her cheeks, and she sank against him exhausted in body and spirit. He lifted her, unresisting, on to the bed, where she lay and sobbed helplessly, while the child gave vent to its long restrained feelings in a dismal howl. Dare picked him up, struggling and kicking, and placed him beside his mother. He ceased his wails and cuddled down into the cushions, his stumpy thumb in his mouth, and cast antagonistic glances at his father, who turned to leave the room.

Sunia stretched out her arms.

'Pardon! pardon!' she cried. 'Do not be wroth with me, sahib—do not leave me!'

He came back with reluctance.

'You must never be angry like that again, Sunia,' he said coldly.

She clutched his coat and dragged at him till he knelt by the bed, and, taking his arm, she placed it round herself and the child.

'It was but for a moment,' she said, in coaxing apology, and rubbed her cheek against his sleeve. 'How could I endure to see the child beaten on account of that worthless Tulsi—a servant? Forget it my chosen, my beloved. Forgive thy little slave. See'—she looked down at the baby's dark head now nestled sleepily at her breast—'are we not thy two loved ones? Do not scold us and say harsh words, or we both shall die of shame and sorrow. Behold, I lie in the ashes of despair!'

She pulled his face down to hers, and Stephen gave the required caress in silence. He knew that explanation would be useless. Sunia was only distressed because he was vexed with her, not because she had allowed the child to be naughty, and had herself behaved like a savage. From her point of view his displeasure was unreasonable; the sahib had developed a craze that the child was not to tyrannize over Tulsi the menial, which was manifestly absurd, if to do so gave the least pleasure to the little king; also, for some curious English reason, he seemed to consider that she should control her feelings of anger when anything annoyed her. She failed to understand the sense of his objection. Still, she lived but to please him, and so in his presence she must remember to subdue her inclinations when angry, and must prevent little Maru from being too *zubberdust* (tyrannical) in his behaviour. The main thing now was to re-establish herself in the favour of

her lord; and so, dismissing Tulsi from the room, she proceeded to wheedle and cajole him with all the arts of native womanhood till she was satisfied that her recent mistake was forgiven. Then, wearied with her emotion and exertions, she fell asleep, and Stephen withdrew his arm from beneath her neck, and left mother and child wrapped in a peaceful slumber.

He changed his clothes, and had his dinner which he ate with little appreciation, even of the snipe he had so recently shot now cooked in the perfection of their freshness. He felt restless and disturbed; the scene with Sunia had oppressed him, and he also found his thoughts straying persistently to the cluster of white tents in the mango-grove. He wondered repeatedly how many guns the party was composed of, how long they meant to stay, what ground they had planned to shoot over to-morrow, how he could best avoid them. A vague impulse drew him from the bungalow. He stood outside in the golden light of the marvellous Eastern moon, and gazed across the desolate expanse of plain towards the solid clump of trees where other men of his class and country were doubtless laughing and talking over an attractive meal in a well-appointed dining-tent. He felt impelled to walk towards the spot. He wanted to hear their voices, perhaps to catch a glimpse of the group round the table, without being himself discovered.

A shivering whine at his feet told him that Sally had joined him under protest, torn between devotion to her master and the comfort of the rug before the wood fire.

'Go back Sally, old girl,' he said, and waved her towards the open door; 'I'm not coming in yet, and I don't want you.'

She obeyed him, perplexed and offended, and went to the threshold of the bungalow, where she stood, with one paw raised, in anxious doubt and disapproval of his conduct.

He strolled away, his hands in his pockets, his face towards the blurred outline of the trees in the distance. The soft, wide radiance of the moonlight lay over the flat country, the few shadows were sharp and black, and he could see his way as clearly as though it were the daytime. Once he stopped in hesitation, then went doggedly forward till he reached the outskirts of the mango-grove. He saw the light of the camp-fires glowing red through the trees, heard the clatter of servants' voices, the high, anxious neigh of a horse. There were more tents than he had expected, and he cautiously drew near to the largest of them, till he could distinguish the sound of laughter and voices within. Then suddenly he felt like an outcast, a thief, skulking behind the trees, and a panic seized him that a dog might run out and bark at him, or a passing servant discover his whereabouts. What had induced him to come and hang round a camp as though he were a jackal or a pariah? Yet he lingered, held to the spot by some nameless fascination, listening to the laughter and murmur of voices, till presently the entrance-curtain of the tent was rolled up and fastened from inside, and he saw plainly into the lighted interior.

Servants were hurrying in and out of the further

entrance with plates and dishes, a square table stood in the middle, and he counted eight figures seated at it. Two of them were women—young women with fair, fluffy hair, fresh English complexions, dainty clothes with light lace high up to their throats. They made him remember Georgie Dalison, as he had not thought of her since he had banished her photograph from his sight and deliberately shut her image from his mind. A passion of regret, despair, and futile yearning assailed him. He turned abruptly from the bright little scene, and went back across the plain, his hands clenched, his teeth set. He made for the aqueduct, not for the bungalow. Always in his moments of keenest emotion he involuntarily sought the river. And far into the quiet night he sat on the parapet of the aqueduct, that shone white and unchanging in the moonlight, and gazed down into the shallow, swirling eddies of the Waters of Destruction. The canal slipped along in monotonous smoothness behind him, and all around lay the vast, mysterious silence of the Indian night, broken only by a faint sound of singing from the village, or the cry of a solitary jackal crossing the empty plain.

CHAPTER II

In two days the camp moved away, whether to further hunting-grounds in the district or back to the station whence it came Stephen never heard; but he saw no more of the sporting party, though while they remained in the neighbourhood he was provoked by the echoes of their shots.

The brief Christmas rains, for once, fell in their due season, swelling the river till the sand islands disappeared and the current ran swiftly, refreshing the dry, bright glory of the Indian winter, and giving promise of a cold weather prolonged. Early in the new year, Mr. Renny paid a quick visit of inspection to Nandi, and this time his arrival was exceptional in that he did not come alone. Stephen rode up the canal bank to meet him one keen, sharp morning, when the mist was being drawn by the sun from the face of the water and hung in filmy wisps over the crops on either side, and saw, with amazed apprehension, that two figures on horseback were approaching in the distance, and that one of them was a woman. She proved to be Mrs. Alfred Skinner, *née* Larken.

'My! How you are thunder-struck!' she cried, in laughing triumph. 'You did not expect to see

anyone else with Joe—least of all *me!* The servants must have been obedient. I gave them orders not to say I was coming when they arrived with the tents. I wanted to give you "Oh! what a surprise!"'

'I am very glad to see you again,' said Dare, and marvelled to find that he really felt what he said.

There was something heart-warming in the homely, honest face, the friendly brown eyes, and the frank, though loud, manner. She had also changed very much for the better in appearance. She was thinner, her features were less coarse, she was neatly habited, and wore a becoming gray felt hat, with a scarlet silk puggaree twisted about the crown.

'I thought you and your husband had gone home,' he said, when he had greeted Mr. Renny and turned his horse to ride alongside Mrs. Skinner.

'We are just going; Alfred has got his leave at last. We have taken six months, and can extend it if we want. We came to Pari to say good-bye to my people, and when I found Joe was making a run out to Nandi, I said, "I will come, too, and say good-bye to Mr. Dare, and have another little taste of camp life." We do not start for Bombay till next week, so there was plenty of time for me to come out for a day or two.'

'And you left your husband at Pari? How cruel of you!'

'Oh, yes. I told him I did not want him, and that he had better not come. They do not under-

stand camp life—these railway men. We do not get it in that department like in the Irrigation, only always, always in trains.'

'Skinner is a very easy-going chap,' interrupted Mr. Renny; 'she does just what she fancies.'

'*Of* course!' retorted Loo; 'what else?'

'Why, he's much too good to you,' said her brother-in-law severely. He turned to Stephen. 'What in the world she wanted to come bothering out here for I can't think, but there was no stopping her—so here she is!'

'I wished to see Mr. Dare again, and to ask him one or two things,' said Mrs. Skinner mysteriously. 'We will go out for a walk this evening, Mr. Dare—you and I together, without Joe. I have got quite used to walking now. Alfred says all in England walk so much, so I have practised. I feel rather afraid about going home. Everything will seem so strange at first, and I have never even seen a ship or the sea. We have taken first-class tickets P. and O. and got a cabin in the middle of the steamer, but I am sure I shall be very sick at stomach.'

'It's a long time since *I* saw the sea or a ship,' said Mr. Renny ruefully. 'It's a hopeless business for the breadwinner, with the rupee worth so little and promotion so infernally bad, and two children at home, not to mention more that ought to go.' He might have added: 'And a mother and sister-in-law to keep as well;' but perhaps consideration for Loo's feelings restrained him.

He pushed on a little way ahead of the other two, cracking his whip testily.

'And you,' said Mrs. Skinner, in a low voice, to Stephen—'when are *you* going home?'

'Never,' he answered.

'When I was here last time—do you remember?—you got the bad news about your people, and you told me all about it. Oh, what a long time ago it seems!'

'Yes, of course I remember; and you were very kind and sympathetic.'

She looked away over the crops, and reddened slowly.

'I have never forgotten how disappointed you were,' she went on, with a quaver in her voice; 'and I have often thought and thought about it all and wondered if things were any better. But I did not like to write. Joe Renny says he thinks you have still to send home nearly all your pay?'

Dare shrugged his shoulders indifferently. He was touched by her genuine concern and the interest in himself, which he could not but perceive had brought her out to Nandi, but he felt no inclination to lay bare his feelings to her as he had done once before, nearly three years ago, when his mind had seemed dislocated with the shock of disappointment. Now he almost resented her pity (perhaps because he was so conscious of the need of it), though he knew that she was not prompted to probe into his circumstances by mere curiosity. He attributed her attitude to the mistaken kindness of an unrefined nature, not realizing that he had been the one gleam of romance in Loo Skinner's narrow existence, and that he would always occupy a special shrine in her

heart quite apart from her honest affection for her husband and contentment in her married life. There was also an element of the maternal instinct in her feeling for Stephen Dare, and she would have made any effort within her limited powers to help him or to brighten his life. It was principally this sentiment that had brought her out to Nandi; to see for herself how he was bearing the burden of his isolation; to suggest a plan which she had long cherished in her mind for its alleviation; and, perhaps, to remonstrate with him on the course of life to which, she felt sure, the solitude had driven him. For Joe Renny had hinted to Mrs. Skinner, when trying to dissuade her from accompanying him to Nandi, that Stephen Dare was not living there alone.

'How long is it to go on,' she asked—'this sending money, sending money? Is it to last all your life?'

'I suppose so, unless a miracle happens.'

'Will your old uncle never help you or your mother while he lives?'

'Never.'

'And is there no chance of your getting his money when he dies?'

'None. Unless he dies without a will, and he is the very last person to do that. In fact, we know he has made one and also what is in it. He has left everything to various charities.'

'He and his will ought to be burnt together,' said Mrs. Skinner.

'I quite agree with you,' replied her companion grimly.

Mr. Renny reined in his pony at this moment,

and asked his assistant for some official information. Afterwards the three cantered abreast down the canal bank, crossed the roadway of the aqueduct at a walk, and rode into the compound of the bungalow talking of general matters.

'We have got our tents,' said Loo, as Stephen helped her to dismount; 'we shan't want any of the bungalow.'

He looked swiftly at her. Had Renny told her about Sunia?

'Come and have tea outside my tent at four o'clock,' she added; 'and then we'll go for a stroll.'

He agreed, and stood chatting with her for a few minutes, while from behind the cane blinds that shielded the side veranda Sunia and Tulsi peeped in excited curiosity at 'the memsahib.'

'Who is she?' Sunia asked uneasily; 'is she the wife or the daughter of Renny sahib?'

'She is neither. Muttroo hath told me that she is the sister of the sahib's wife, and is married herself,' said Tulsi, full of important information. 'But truly she is very ugly.'

'They have no shame, these bold white women. Once did I see three of them when a sahib's camp came near the village, and I recall how I, with others, stood by the tents and looked on their strange doings, and we followed at a distance when they walked out with faces bare for all men to gaze on and revile. Truly, dost thou think this memsahib is without beauty?' concluded Sunia, in jealous doubt.

'Beauty!' with a contemptuous flip of her brown

fingers. 'A face the hue of unleavened bread and no jewellery, and a man's hat and coat. The sahib is, doubtless, faint with desire to seek thy presence, and this bold one will not permit him to leave her.'

'Tulsi,' said Sunia piteously, 'what if the heart of my lord should wander from me to this woman of his own colour and country?'

'Can the heart of the sahib be turned so easily from sweetness such as thine—from the mother of his man-child—from his other half? Doubtless she will try her wiles upon him, for is not the sahib beautiful to behold? But he will heed them not, and at once, when the white woman seeks her tent, will he come to thy side.'

Tulsi spoke with unshakable conviction; but, nevertheless, when Mrs. Skinner left Stephen with a backward look and a wave of her hand, he went straight to his own room to bathe and change. Then he had his breakfast and crossed the compound to Mr. Renny's office-tent for a long professional interview.

On his return to the bungalow to put away his papers and make himself presentable for tea with Mrs. Skinner, he found Tulsi skulking in a corner of the veranda, her face modestly shrouded, and apparently overcome with bashfulness at having to address the sahib in person. She reluctantly murmured something behind the folds of her *chudder*, standing with her back towards him. Tulsi's observance of native feminine etiquette always exasperated her master.

'What is it?' he said crossly; 'speak out.'

'My mistress sends salaam,' lisped Tulsi in an affected voice; 'she bade me desire the Presence to come to her without delay.'

He passed her with impatience, and entered the side-room as though he had little time to spare. Maru was squatting in a corner playing with some painted clay toys. Sunia was reclining on her cushions dressed in her best and most treasured garments—a fine white petticoat with a broad coloured border, and a muslin wrapper spangled with gold tinsel; she wore her entire stock of ornaments, her skin and hair glistened, and she smelt strongly of jasmine. A caressing languor was in her attitude, her eyes gleamed mistily between the heavy, painted lids, and she held out her arms to him with a little coo of welcome.

He looked at her for a moment, and seemingly, without provocation, there arose in his mind a storm of interposing memories. He saw the lighted interior of a tent, with English people seated round the table; saw the fresh, fair faces of the women, heard their voices, their high, clear tones, and their laughter; felt the European atmosphere about them. And suddenly all the satiety and weariness of this native woman that had been slowly deepening within him through all the arid months of the last two years confronted him as a harsh and complete reality, for which there could be no palliation, no possible relief. A repulsion that was almost physical pain assailed his heart and mind, his very veins. He felt he *could not* touch her, could not even listen to her; that if he went

near her he should kill her. The violence of his feeling appalled him. He was helpless in its clutch; his will seemed paralyzed. His hand went up involuntarily to his eyes, and he turned and left the room without speaking. She called after him, and he heard her, recognising, with a sense of wonder, that he felt no necessity or desire to answer—that the sound affected him no more than the cry of a bird in the compound.

Quickly he left the bungalow and walked towards Mrs. Skinner's tent. His thoughts were shapeless; he felt numb in mind and body, and scarcely conscious of the ground beneath his feet.

Loo was sitting under the flap of her tent with a tea-table in front of her.

'You look quite queer,' she exclaimed, with her usual directness. 'What is wrong?'

'Nothing particular,' he answered vaguely; 'but I'll have a whisky and soda, if you don't mind, instead of tea.'

* * * * *

Tulsi ran to answer the shrill entreaty of Sunia's call. She found her mistress prone among the cushions, her shoulders heaving with sobs, the spangled *sari* lying twisted and crumpled on the floor. The child had toddled to the bedside, and was holding on by the framework, while he bleated 'Mam-ma, mam-ma!' in distressed perplexity.

'Aree!' cried Tulsi; 'what trouble is this?'

Sunia raised an angry, streaming face.

'Did I not say that the heart of my lord, the sahib, would go from me to the whey-faced woman?

Now hath he left me for her, and but for the colour of her skin she is as native as thou or I; for did not Muttroo relate to thee how neither she nor her people had ever crossed the black water, or so much as beheld my lord's country? I had waited for his coming, and made ready with sweet oils and perfume and my finest clothes. When he entered he but stood for a moment and went out, speaking no word. She hath bewitched him. Where hath he gone? Answer me—delay not—for my heart is turned to water.'

'In truth I know not,' said Tulsi, in sympathetic perturbation.

'Then look and tell me. From the veranda can the tents be seen, and if he is there I will behold his actions from behind the *chiks*.'

Tulsi ran out, her heavy footsteps hampered by the voluminous folds of her coarse cotton skirt.

'The sahib is seated before the tent with the memsahib,' she reported over her shoulder; 'they drink tea together. See, Huzoor! it is the truth.'

Sunia picked up the child, who was whimpering.

'There, there, my petling! Weep not, for as yet thou knowest not sorrow. Time enough to lament when one thou lovest proves false.'

She carried him, astride on her hip, into the veranda, where she sat him down on a striped drugget, and pacified him with a sticky native sweetmeat. Then she pressed her face anxiously to the bamboo blind.

'Wait,' suggested Tulsi. 'Let us first inquire of the crow if matters be as bad as they seem. The answer may give comfort.'

At the foot of the three shallow steps a large shiny black crow was walking deliberately to and fro, with wide, straddling gait, and one impudent eye on the movements within the veranda. He intended presently to slip under the blind at the end, which was shorter than the rest, and snatch up any morsel of food he might find within his reach. There were generally little bits scattered about which ought not to be wasted.

'Yes—ask—ask!' urged Sunia.

'Mr. Crow,' began Tulsi solemnly, and with deep respect, 'say, is the heart of the sahib true, or hath the white devil bewitched him with her lying eyes?'

The crow flapped his wings.

'He will fly away,' cried Sunia with relief. 'The answer will be good.'

But the bird had no intention of flying away; instead, he came closer to the veranda, and hopped on to the lower step.

'The crow stays,' wailed Sunia; 'the answer is bad.' For, as every native peasant knows, if the crow does not fly away cawing on being questioned the omen is unfavourable.

'Huzoor, weep not,' comforted Tulsi; 'look again through the *chik*, and behold with thine own eyes that the sahib and the memsahib do but converse. Remember, that the ways of the white people are different—they can look at and speak with one another forgetting that they are men and women. Come, and see for thyself. There is no harm, else why should they sit out in the sight of the whole compound?'

Sobbing, complaining, and asserting that she was deserted, Sunia again peered through the blind, and, with intense and strained attention, the two women watched the unconscious English couple seated one on either side of the little camp tea-table.

'See her manner of eating!' exclaimed Tulsi; 'such small pieces, and so slowly! She does not fill her mouth, and she drinks, too, with her food, not waiting till the meal be ended.'

'Such is the custom of sahibs,' said Sunia, with a superior knowledge. 'Oh, if the food would but choke her!' she added, in renewed agony of jealousy. 'See, my lord smiles, and is pleased with her words. Ai! ai! now they rise—whither can they be going? Tulsi, go after them—follow their footsteps—watch! watch!'

'The sahib would see me and send me back,' objected Tulsi, not relishing the rôle of detective.

'Then go forth as though to eat the air. Stay—take Maru with thee as if for his evening outing. Maybe, seeing the child, the sahib will remember Sunia, the child's mother. Hasten, fool! bring the little one's clothing.'

Maru was hastily squeezed into a little wadded chintz garment that stuck out stiffly, back and front, and the red skull-cap was clapped on to his head. Then, astride on Tulsi's hip, the remains of the sweet-meat clinging to his face and hands, he was borne out into the afternoon sunshine, which at this time of year in India so quickly gives place to the chill of the cold weather sunset.

Stephen and Mrs. Skinner had risen, and were strolling towards the aqueduct. Over their tea they had talked of the Rennys and Sue Larken, who, her sister confided to Stephen, corresponded regularly with Mr. Green, and kept his letters in a locked tin box. Loo had also spoken of her own married life and its happy tranquillity, and had admitted the virtues of Alfred—his fidelity, good temper, and appreciation of his spouse. Now, as they walked along the canal bank, she opened the subject of Dare's own position, and reverted to the question of his going home.

'No,' he said quietly; 'I have told you there is no prospect of my being able to take furlough, and even if I could, I doubt whether I should go. I am tied now to the country—my own doing, of course.'

'I know about it,' said Loo, in a low voice; 'Joe Renny has told me. It is a pity.'

'Why is it a pity?' he said roughly. 'Can you blame a man in my position for snatching at any distraction that came in his way? What difference will it ever make to anyone? As long as I treat her well, and do my duty by her, I don't see that I have anything to reproach myself with. If you are disturbed as to the moral side of the question, perhaps it will relieve your mind to hear that before Mr. Tod died of cholera here nearly three years ago he read the marriage service over us.'

He laughed involuntarily, he hardly knew why, but for the moment any concern over his past action seemed ridiculous. He also felt that he had spoken with a petulance of which he was a little ashamed,

but the coming of Loo Skinner had stirred the apathy of his existence, and brought sharply to the surface the recognition of his weariness of Sunia. His nerves felt sore, he resented the mental discomfort from which he was suffering. It was unnecessary—to no purpose.

'My!' cried Loo, astounded at this piece of information. 'Then is she your wife?'

'Upon my word I don't know. I don't suppose the ceremony was legal. But that makes very little difference—I feel bound to her morally.'

'And do you—are you very fond of her?'

He hesitated.

'No,' he said at last; 'I have grown to hate the sight of her. Poor little thing! it is not her fault, it was inevitable, I suppose. But I never realized that. What man would under the circumstances?'

'But she is only a native,' argued Loo, 'and they do not understand such ideas as yours about moral bindings and all sorts. You could get rid of her just when you wished if you gave her enough money. It is often done, though not so much in India as in Burmah. Why, Alfred has told me——'

'Yes, yes, no doubt,' he interrupted; 'but this is different. She wasn't of that class; and—and—now there is a child, a little boy.'

'Oh cracky!' said Loo, in horrified distress.

She was silent till they reached the canal bank and had passed under one of the land-bays of the aqueduct, and so up on to the further roadway. Then she stopped, and with her face away from the bungalow leaned on the masonry, that was warm from the sun,

and gazed thoughtfully over the flat, open country. The swirling of the river, now swift and deep with the late rain, rose towards them from the arches below; the slow passage of the canal was audible behind them; in the distance the sarus birds called their clanging notes, which echoed over the marshes as the air grew denser with the coming chill of evening.

Loo Skinner picked little pieces of lime from the cracks in the stonework and threw them over the parapet into the river. She was trying to shape into words what was in her mind; to tell Stephen Dare of her pity, her sympathy, her regret, her keen understanding of his situation. She watched him with a sob in her throat. He had swung himself up on to the parapet and was sitting sideways looking down into the water. She noted the strong lines of his figure, the excellence of his proportions; the young, clean-cut face, with the intensely blue eyes, and close, thick hair, the colour of a fair child's. There were lines on the sunburned skin, a weariness in the eyes, an indefinable something about the face that suddenly reminded her of Joe Renny. She puzzled vaguely for a moment over the nebulous resemblance, then dimly realized that both faces were stamped with the outward expression of a life that was baulked and contracted. Her heart ached for him, and perhaps her feelings mutely touched his mind and drew him from his reserve, for when he slipped down from the parapet and stood by her side, looking over the sun-washed country, an impulse moved him to speak freely of his life, to let

loose the passion of bitter disappointment which had smouldered in his being from the time when a future had been closed to him, and which now was ablaze and insistent. Even if this woman could not wholly follow him, at least he knew that she was ready to sympathize and listen; that she would give him neither advice which he could not follow, nor reproof which in a measure he felt he deserved, for had he not, by his own weakness, added to the difficulties of his existence? He let himself go, and Loo Skinner stood and heard him with the tears in her eyes, and her upper teeth pressed tightly on her lip. When he ceased, she beat her hands on the parapet in front of her.

'Oh, something must be done!' she cried. 'I will help you—I *will*. I will go to your uncle when I get to England and tell him he is killing you, body and soul; that when he dies he will go to hell for his wickedness if he lets you rot out your life here because he will not help your mother, and lets all the burden fall on you. It is time he knew what he is doing, and that something must, must, *must* be done!'

Stephen smiled. He felt better, lighter hearted for his outburst, relieved for the moment of the poison in his heart, and he was also amused at Loo's plan.

'It would not be so easy to manage,' he said, 'even if it would do the slightest good, and I certainly shouldn't envy you your welcome. No, Mrs. Skinner,' he added gratefully, laying his hand on hers; 'I am afraid you can do nothing for me in

that way, but you have helped me a great deal with your patience and sympathy. There is nothing for it but just to go on as I am. My mother's position is hopeless, or she wouldn't take my money; it's not only herself she has to think of, and it's a mercy I am able to help them. Her husband can't earn anything now, and the children are not old enough; even if they were, what could they do with training for every profession so expensive, and all the markets so overcrowded? They don't seem to be a very robust family either. One or other of them is always ill.'

'Shall I go and see them for you when I get home?' said Loo eagerly. 'We shall stay with Alfred's aunt and her husband, who take paying guests in their house in—Kensington, is it? Alfred always addresses the envelopes when I write, and I don't write often, only when I want a hat or something sent out.'

Stephen successfully evaded her proposal to visit his relatives. He knew that Loo would make no secret of his deprivations, and he was anxious that his mother should remain in ignorance of the true state of affairs.

'Oh, they live a long way out,' he said; 'and I'm sure you won't be more in London than you can help; you will hate the smoke and the gloom, and all the hurry and noise.'

'When I am there,' she said dreamily, 'I shall remember this afternoon standing here with you in the sun and looking down at the river.'

The next few moments passed in idle silence.

Then, suddenly from the river bank on the further side of the aqueduct to that on which they stood there arose a succession of quick, agonized cries.

'Oh, what is that?'

Mrs. Skinner turned a startled face to her companion.

'An owl, most likely,' he reassured her; 'they often make the weirdest noises.'

But mutually they hastened from the roadway back under the aqueduct, and reclimbed the slope breathlessly.

'There it is again,' panted Loo; 'that's not an owl. Look! it must be that native woman running up and down the bank. Oh my! is she going to throw herself in?'

Dare saw the figure of a native woman rushing madly to and fro some hundred yards further down the river bank, throwing up her arms, her screams rending the pure, soft air.

'Sahib! sahib! sahib!'

'It is Tulsi!' said Stephen below his breath, and began to run, followed closely by Loo Skinner.

The distracted figure of Sunia's waiting-maid swirled to meet them, and fell a helpless, shapeless heap at Stephen's feet.

'The babba! the babba!' she shrieked, pointing to the water, then beat her forehead on the ground.

Stephen stepped over the prostrate body and ran to the river's edge. There, on the surface of one of the treacherous pools that were formed by the shelving sand and filled to the brim by the winter rains, floated a little scarlet skull-cap.

CHAPTER III

As darkness fell over the country with sudden, quiet chill Dare came up from the river bank with Mr. Renny at his side, and a miscellaneous concourse of servants and villagers closely following. Some of these carried nets and poles, and each brown face was full of sympathetic dejection, betraying the pitiful failure of the search. Muttroo, the old bearer, lagged behind crying hopelessly. The natives were murmuring together.

'Maybe the little one was carried far, even to where the Kali Nadi flows into Mother Gunga,' said one to his neighbour.

'Nay; for when the memsahib came running to the compound for help did I think of that, and I went swiftly along the bank for more than a mile. Naught did I see on the surface of the water save the swollen carcass of a wild pig, and how that came to be there the gods alone can tell. The weeds by the aqueduct must have caught the babba and held him fast, though it is true that all the pools have been searched.'

An old bow-legged villager, who had been listening to the talk, now spoke with slow, melancholy significance:

'When water is plentiful in the Nadi, as at present, have I seen muggers (crocodiles) lying on the sand-banks. One, two, three, sometimes more. They stray up from the great river, and when the waters here become shallow again do they return whence they caime.'

'Hai!-ai! If a mugger took the child, of course the search was vain. Doubtless that was what occurred, and it is the will of Kali. Dost recall what his mother did in the temple? Maybe this evil thing hath come about through the anger of the goddess, and that being so, the parents may weep themselves blind, but they will never recover the babba, dead or alive.'

Mr. Renny turned round.

'Cease chattering,' he ordered abruptly.

There was an abashed silence. But Dare had not consciously heard the low-toned conversation. At the moment his mind had slipped back to the day when he had carried Sunia up from the river, her warm, slender body nestled in his arms, her young cheek pressed against his neck. The memory jarred on him, and his thoughts swung round again to the immediate future with a helpless sensation of despair. How would Sunia, with her elemental instincts and unschooled passions, face the loss of the child? He felt a vast compassion for her grief, and also for the tragedy of the little boy's death. He reproached himself with having neglected Maru, with having shirked his duty. He wished he had troubled to win the baby's affections, and that he had left the child less to the uncertain rule of Sunia

and the servants. Still, amidst his remorse Dare's mind whispered that the child, for its own sake, was better dead than living. The future for such as Maru must, even under the most favourable circumstances, be ambiguous and unsatisfying. Reared as a native, he would have been tortured by the blunted but conflicting energies of his English blood; brought up as an Englishman, his native tendencies and instincts would have hampered him at every turn.

Dare walked on in weary, heart-sick silence. Tulsi had given such a frenzied and incoherent description of the accident that the precise spot where the child had fallen into the water, or exactly what had happened, was uncertain. The native girl had sobbed out rambling statements from which it could only be gathered that she had left Maru playing in a sandy cleft by the riverside, whilst she herself crept along the bank towards the aqueduct.

With a native's hopeless lack of power to judge time, she was quite unable even to guess how long her absence had lasted: all she could say was that, on her return, the child had disappeared, and only the little red cap was floating on the water. Her story was mingled with wild assertions that she had but obeyed the orders of Sunia, her mistress, and that if only the sahib and the white lady had kept away from the river, all would have been well. Finally, when Dare spoke sharply to her, Tulsi had fled as one demented, crying and wailing, to the village, from whence an inquisitive but kindly little

crowd had soon afterwards hurried across the plain to personally ascertain the truth of the distracted creature's words.

Loo Skinner had not returned to the river after sending help from the compound. Dare surmised, with a sense of confidence and gratitude, that she had stayed to try and guard Sunia from hearing bad news before it was inevitable. He wondered dully what had been happening in the bungalow as the building showed white before him in the dusk. The sound of Renny's voice silencing the natives' chatter stayed his thoughts.

'We must get torches and go on with the search,' he said sadly, 'though there is no chance now of finding the poor little chap alive. It seems incredible that not a trace could be found except the cap.'

Joe Renny thought of the words he had just heard in Hindustani, but he said nothing. Dare must have seen stray crocodiles now and again in or out of the river, and the fact would return to his memory quite soon enough.

'Of course, we will continue the search,' he said; 'but I'm afraid it's useless. Unluckily, we must move on to-morrow, or Mrs. Skinner won't be in time to start for Bombay with her husband. It was a foolish business her coming out at all, but perhaps now it is just as well she did. She may have been a help——'

He glanced furtively at Stephen, thinking of the dead child's mother.

Loo came out of the bungalow to meet them in

the quickly-increasing darkness. They felt her mute question as they approached.

'Hopeless,' said her brother-in-law. 'We have found nothing.'

Dare turned and waited for Muttroo to come up. He had to give the old man instructions as to the lanterns and torches that were needed, and the *baksheesh* for the villagers who had worked with such sympathetic readiness. When he had finished he found himself alone with Loo Skinner. Mr. Renny had passed on to his tent.

'Go in quickly to her,' said Loo in a low voice. 'She is nearly crazy with suspicion and suspense. When I had sent Joe and the servants down to you I went to the side-room and told her you and the child would be back presently, and that I had come on ahead to visit. I was hoping and hoping every minute that you would turn up with the boy all safe. I kept her away from the veranda by showing her my bangles and brooches, and all the things in my pocket. At first she was very sulky and suspicious, and then, when time went on and you did not come, she would go out in the veranda and call for the servants. Of course nobody came because they were all down by the river, and then she got very frightened and said all sorts of things'—even the cheeks of Loo Skinner, who was as familiar as a native with Hindustani revilement, burned at the remembrance of Sunia's language—'and it was all I could do to keep her from running out. Oh, I have had a terrible time! She flew into such a rage as I have never seen before in my life, and now she is

lying on her bed quite fatigued. Go to the poor thing. But I pity you much more,' she concluded, with a sigh.

When he had disappeared into the bungalow she put her handkerchief to her eyes.

'Oh my!' she sobbed. 'What a lot of trouble for him! And that native creature will hate him now she has lost the child. If only he would get rid of her! But he will never do it—he has such ideas!'

* * * * *

For many days following the terrible evening when Sunia had learned that her child was drowned, she lay burning and delirious with fever. Stephen had watched Joe Renny and Mrs. Skinner ride out of the compound, and had turned back into the house to hear the sick woman raving of Maru and the perfidy of her lord the sahib. Always she repeated her conversation with Tulsi in the veranda, and called perpetually on the crow to give her reassurance by flying away at her question. In her disordered imagination she dressed the little boy in his wadded coat and sent him out with Tulsi, who was to bring back word of the white people's doings. She stormed at the memsahib, accused her and Stephen of murdering the child, and wept and prayed to Mother Kali and the Christian God alternately.

Stephen nursed her with tender, untiring care. He made Gopal Dass come over every other day, and paid him well for his unwilling trouble. Tulsi had concealed herself in the village, apparently con-

vinced that she would be surrendered to the police if she ventured back to the bungalow; and, as Sunia never inquired for her, Stephen engaged an old woman to help him, who was said to be skilled in nursing, though he had sternly to prohibit her from administering to the patient concoctions of her own, or spells written on paper and rolled into the semblance of pills. He angrily refused to advance money for the purchase of such remedies from the local wizard, thereby gaining for himself amongst the servants and villagers the reputation of being an obstinate, misguided fool where the powers of magic were in question.

At last the fever lessened, and only the terrible after-weakness remained to be fought, to which natives, having no stamina, so readily succumb. But, as a Christian, Sunia had eaten meat, never stinting her appetite, and her diet had been a liberal one for a sufficiently long time to strengthen her constitution in a way that the scanty allowances of her village life could never have done. Now daily she grew stronger, and soon she was well enough to sit out in her veranda and practically to resume her normal life.

But a listless apathy succeeded her illness, and Sunia showed a dull indifference towards her surroundings, Stephen himself included. He knew she was brooding heavily over the loss of her child, and that her sorrow was further embittered by her own delusions. Pitifully he recognised that, in a vague, unreasoning way she blamed him for the boy's death, and that she had not the mental power to

overcome the conviction of his faithlessness which had so firmly stamped itself upon her mind. She suffered as an animal suffers, accepting her misery without protest or question.

These were trying days for Stephen. He endeavoured to amuse her in the intervals of his work; he sent for mechanical toys, superior sweetmeats, pretty trifles. He sat with her, showed her pictures, talked to her, reasoned with her, was ungruding in his efforts. She accepted it all with inert acquiescence, answered when he spoke to her, but vacantly, without animation or interest. When he reasoned with her she said nothing, showing no resistance or initiative, and sometimes it was almost as though she were under the influence of a drug.

To Stephen's wonderment she never mentioned the child, or asked to see the little stock of clothes and toys that his father had shut away from her sight during her illness. She seemed happiest when sitting idle on the floor of the veranda during the long, sunny days, her back against the wall, whilst the old woman (who, finding herself in comfortable quarters, had taken up her residence in the compound) sat opposite to her mistress, and related endless, monotonous stories of the gods, curious wild myths of incarnations, weird tales of evil spirits, demons, and supernatural influences.

Stephen often heard the old lady droning away in the veranda, and once, when approaching through the side-room, he had stopped, unnoticed, and listened, arrested by the expression on Sunia's face. Her hands were clasped round her knees, her chin

was thrust forward, and in her dark eyes, still lustrous and beautiful and looking larger from her loss of flesh, there burned a sullen fire as though she were watching some tragedy that awoke no pity in her heart, but only a morbid, unwholesome interest. The old woman, like a wizened, evil monkey, squatted on the edge of the drugget chewing betel-nut in her toothless mouth, and told a story of horror, sacrifice, and revenge—a story that was apparently connected with the worship of the goddess Kali, for the name was frequently repeated.

Suddenly Stephen suspected that an additional cause of Sunia's hopeless dejection might possibly be her old terror of Kali revived an hundredfold; that probably she regarded the child's death as a sign of the undying wrath of the goddess. He knew that if he were right he would now need all his energies to cleanse her mind from the fatal dread, if he ever succeeded in doing so at all.

Two or three days later something happened that confirmed his suspicions. He had been absent for a night on an inspection up the canal bank, and finishing his work earlier than he expected, he altered his plans, and returned late in the evening instead of on the following morning. It was almost dark when he dismounted, but as he handed the reins to his syce he noticed an object that was moving restlessly about in front of the bungalow uttering long, plaintive cries.

'Is that one of the goats?' he asked the man. 'What is wrong with her?'

'I know not,' was the indifferent answer. 'May-

be the kid has strayed; a *batcha* (young one) was born to her but two days since.'

As he led the pony to the stables the man drove the bleating mother before him, remonstrating gravely with her for creating an unseemly disturbance. Stephen entered the bungalow. His dinner must be late owing to the unexpectedness of his return, so he bathed and changed, and then lifted the blue and yellow curtain softly in case Sunia should be sleeping.

Only the further end of the side-room was alight, where a wall-lamp, turned up to its full height, was smoking horribly. It hung low on the wall, and beneath it had been placed a round cane stool on which rested a brass image, crude and hideous, that Stephen had never before seen in Sunia's quarters. The idol was evidently new, for the metal shone harshly with none of the golden mellowness of ancient brass. The glaring eyes were made of red and white sealing-wax, and the menacing limbs radiated from the body grasping weapons of destruction. Before the repulsive figure lay bunches of marigolds and little piles of coppers, rice, sugar, and butter; besides something that in the harsh, uncertain light looked like a tiny, white rabbit.

Sunia was kneeling in front of the image, swaying to and fro chanting in a low sing-song. She was naked save for her petticoat and jewellery, and her thinness showed cruelly. What was she doing? Stephen stood still, and as he watched her the shrill bleating of the goat outside came to his ears; the creature had evidently returned to its quest. He

moved closer to the kneeling figure, and saw that Sunia was slowly tearing to fragments the Hindi Bible and Prayer-Book that had belonged to Abel Tod. Each handful of leaves that she plucked from the books she held up as an offering to Kali before she scattered them around her. Then, drawing nearer still, he saw something else that raised in him a storm of disgust and revulsion. Beside Sunia on the floor, there lay the headless body of a tiny white kid; even now the muscular spasms that succeed a violent death were hardly over, and the warm, wet blood was spattered on the wall, on Sunia's white petticoat, on her hands and face. The little creature's head—that, too, evidently had been severed with clumsiness from the body—lay on the cane stool amidst the marigolds, and rice, and sugar—a sacrifice to Kali. The anxious bleating of the goat outside was explained.

'Sunia!' said Stephen hoarsely.

She turned and gazed at him with lurid eyes.

He shrank from the spectacle of her distorted face with the black hair hanging about it lank and unkempt, a stain of blood across her cheek. Her Northern fanaticism was aflame; she was beyond reason or restraint.

For a moment they stared at one another. Then for Stephen the tension snapped. All the loneliness and difficulty of his life, all his mistakes, his weakness, his efforts, seemed to roll themselves into one mighty force, and burst the door of his heart. He turned and sat down on the low bedstead, covering his face with his hands. His youth, though it

had dropped away from him prematurely, was still near enough to render the pain of dark hours more acute.

A touch on his shoulder made him lift his head. Sunia stood before him. The fierce, fanatical activity was dying out of her eyes.

'Listen, my lord,' she said, in a level, monotonous tone. 'The priest was right. There is no escape from Kali. My life is hers; the child's life was hers and she took it. Now do I hear her voice day and night and feel her presence, and I quail before her. Now do I know that she be a thousand times more mighty than thy God. Can He overcome Kali?' She took a step forward and her voice rose. 'What has He done for me? Could He bring back the child, though I besought Him till my heart broke? Hath He retained for me the favour of my Lord? How can I eat or sleep knowing this fear in my heart?'

Dare did not speak. Of what avail to reason or persuade? The woman's mind could never meet with his; there was no mutual starting-point, no common basis from which they might arrive at any clearer understanding. He sat in dumb, distressed perplexity, and saw Sunia's face quiver and her eyes fill with tears. She threw herself on her knees before him.

'Oh, sahib! Lord! Protector of the Poor! I beseech thee give me rupees that I may go on a pilgrimage and make offerings and obeisance at the great shrines of Kali, and so, maybe, find peace and safety! Take my ornaments'—she tore off her

bangles and anklets, and began to fumble with her other jewellery, finally holding it all up to him in a clinking handful—'they are worth much—doubtless far more than I should need, for the Presence was ever generous. Only grant me the means and permission to go! Others, greater offenders than I, have bathed in sacred waters and done pooja at holy spots, so receiving blessing and protection. Never will my spirit rest, sahib, till I go. With this my most sore desire unfulfilled shall I wither away and die, if a worse evil befall me not.'

The passion of entreaty in her voice and in her haggard face gave Stephen a sharp realization of how hopelessly she was dominated and possessed by the belief that only in the performance of this pilgrimage lay her chance of security from supernatural vengeance. In her present state of mind the consequences, if he refused her petition, would probably be tragic. He could spare her the money with a little extra care, or, if necessary, he could sell his rifle. Also he saw weeks of solitary freedom before him, though he strove to prevent this from influencing his decision. He rose, not touching her, for she sickened him with her blood-smeared hands and face.

'Get up,' he said gently, 'and do as you will. Only there must be no more sacrifice to Kali here — you understand? You may start when it pleases you, and travel in what manner you choose.'

She prostrated herself again at his feet, sobbing with relief and hope.

Three days later Sunia started on her pilgrimage. She had elected to travel, as nearly all the peasant women of India prefer to travel, in a narrow country cart with creaking wheels, drawn by small bullocks that move with incredible slowness until goaded or alarmed, when they will race senselessly for some hundreds of yards. The cart had an awning of canvas draped over a long pole, which would serve to screen the pious pilgrim and her chosen attendant —the crone who had helped to nurse her in her illness. The driver, who also owned the bullocks, was the old woman's husband, and Stephen deputed one of his Hindu servants, an elderly retired sepoy of comparatively honest ideas, to escort and protect the party. He omitted no detail or precaution for Sunia's safety and comfort, and arranged that money should reach her through native banks at the various places for which she was bound, that there might be little danger of robbery or loss on the road.

The cart had been ready since dawn, packed with her personal requirements and those of her retinue, a supply of food and fuel, some brass cooking-vessels and thick wadded quilts, for though the days were growing hot, it was still cold during the night time. A large bundle of fodder for the bullocks completed the outfit, and the cart appeared to be fully loaded even without the passengers.

When Dare received word that Sunia was about to start he went into the side-room, stirred with a curious sensation of mingled regret and relief. He found her standing by the veranda door wrapped in white; she had discarded her ornaments, and her

hands hung bare by her sides. The *sari* that was presently to conceal her features was thrown back, and she looked less sombre, more normal, than he had seen her since the death of the child. She seemed animated, even excited; eager to start, anxious that nothing should be forgotten; evidently there was to be no scene at parting; indeed, she received his farewell kiss and kind words of encouragement almost with cheerfulness.

Then the old woman screeched from the compound that all was ready, and Sunia moved towards the veranda. But on the threshold she turned and cast a long look about the narrow room that had held all her real experience of life. Still she lingered. Then made a sudden, fluttering rush across to the wooden bedstead, now denuded of its pillows and spread only with a coloured cotton quilt. She flung herself down, gathering the gaily-patterned covering up to her face, and burst into loud weeping.

'Maru! Maru! Maru!' she called; and the desolation in her voice was grievous.

At once Stephen's arms were about her in tenderness and pity. He forgot his weariness and disgust of her; forgot that she misjudged and distrusted him; only remembered that she had belonged to him utterly, and that the child she cried for had been his as well as hers.

For a moment she clung to him, while he besought her to forego the foolish journey and stay to let him comfort her. Then firmly she drew herself away. The lurking fear, the mysterious dread was again paramount; and, shrouding her face, she passed

out in silence with steady, determined feet. As she left the veranda her ankle struck against the step, and Stephen saw her salaam to propitiate the spirit dwelling within the stone.

He followed her, shaken and bewildered by the recent swift emotion, and stood to watch the start. The two women clambered into the waiting cart. They resembled bales of cotton as they packed themselves into the vehicle already overfull. He wondered vaguely where they managed to stow their limbs. The grizzled sepoy stood important, at attention, prepared to follow his charge closely on foot, though no doubt once out of his master's sight he would also contrive to squeeze miraculously into the cart.

The driver shouted hoarsely, and twisted the tails of the bullocks. First the animals snorted, and blew, and refused to stir; then, unexpectedly, they rushed sideways off the path, bumping and jolting their load over the rough ground of the compound until, with difficulty, they were coaxed and abused into taking the desired direction—along the canal bank. Sunia had never once uncovered her face to look back.

Stephen stood and listened to the slow, harsh creaking of the wheels till the discordant noise gradually died away. Then he went thoughtfully back into the empty side-room.

'It was well to let her go,' said Muttroo, who had followed him. '"The dry husks of the sugar-cane are worthless when the juice has been extracted."'

CHAPTER IV

THE next few weeks passed evenly, slipping away with nothing to mark the progress of the time, and Stephen Dare welcomed the monotonous peace. The days grew longer, the sun more powerful, the air was filled with the scents and sounds of the short Indian spring. Crops flourished green and and yellow over the flat plains, and the song that the villager sings when irrigating his land was heard from early morning till the night time. Stephen was well occupied riding over irrigated areas, interviewing villagers, keeping pace with his office work, his reports, his cases; for the effect of the Christmas rains had worn off, and water was in constant demand that the late spring produce might be garnered before the fierce heat parched the ground and shrivelled vegetation.

At intervals he received curiously-worded post-cards, sent by the travellers from various towns through which they passed. These communications were dictated by the sepoy to professional letter-writers in the bazaars, the messages being translated by the scribes into grotesque English.

'I have honour to report that journey doing well.'

'I beg leave sending word Sunia-bibi safe.'

'By favour of your Highness party come at Benares.'

Stephen hated the sight of the limp, drab, half anna cards with the laboured hand-writing. Each one that arrived reminded him that the day of Sunia's return was drawing nearer, and at last came the unwelcome information that the round of visits to holy spots had been completed and the homeward journey begun.

That evening he took the dogs for a stroll, determined to think out, as he walked, some definite plan for the future, which otherwise must prove increasingly difficult. But later, as he came back in the balmy sunset air, he was still undecided and perplexed, and the dogs put an end to his meditations as they neared the aqueduct, by hunting a fox into the untidy compound of Mr. Green's deserted bungalow, and killing it in the undergrowth. There was no need for Dare to hurry, and after the excitement had subsided he walked round the empty building while the dogs worried the battered little corpse and dragged it to and fro. The place looked very dilapidated and forlorn; mildew was creeping about the walls, and the thatch was black and mouldy; gray squirrels had densely populated the verandas, and the creepers had fallen from the pillars and lay on the steps in blazing mounds of yellow and purple. He peered through a dusty window-pane, and saw that the white ants were having it all their own way inside. During Mr. Green's time the place had been neat and well kept. It was a pity nobody lived in it now, even if it were only the native

subordinate, who, not unnaturally, preferred a cheaper and more congenial habitation in the village.

Stephen then thought idly of Mr. Green, recalling his putty face and anxious manners. He wondered if Sue Larken would ever succeed in marrying him in spite of the opposition of her brother-in-law. His memory went back to the morning of his accident, when Mr. Green had come forth so unwillingly on the dun-coloured pony. Perhaps if the little man had obeyed his inclinations and stayed at home, he, Stephen, might have lain bleeding and unconscious in the fierce sunshine till he died. Well, it would have spared him much trouble, and delivered him from a very unattractive existence. His thoughts moved on to Loo Skinner in England, and he speculated as to how the different manner of life would affect her. He wished she would write to him, for her comments on her surroundings might be entertaining. Loo was very much in his mind as he wandered home, the dogs happy and blood-stained at his heels, and he was hardly surprised when he entered the bungalow to find a letter from her lying on his table with the English papers.

He opened it with a sense of pleased anticipation and settled himself comfortably in the veranda to read it. Certainly it proved to be an amazing production, both as regards style and contents, and read like a colloquial Hindustani translation. Indeed, this it probably was, for most people born and brought up in India mentally translate from the vernacular:

'My dear Mr. Dare,

'England I do not care for at all. There are no extra servants or coolies, and only one bathroom for everybody in the same house. If you need to buy anything or post a letter at any odd time, you have to go and do it yourself. The washing is very dear and sometimes the price is more than the things, and there seems to be no time or room, or any air. We had a very bad voyage, and I was just as ill as I said. I thought I was dying, and I told Alfred I would never get up again, but he was very cruel, and said, "Have to." But on the deck I was better.

'I have a great lot to write, and you will stare just now when you know what I have done. We remained in London to do our shopping, and I bought a red dress and hat, with feathers to match—very stylish. We put up with Alfred's aunt, who I do not care for at all; she is so fussy, and told me I am extravagant and ought to mend all my clothes myself, and we did not have early tea in the morning. We were so busy shopping and going to theatres and all sorts, and everything took such hours, and when all was done, we went to the North of England to pay long visits to all Alfred's other relations—so many! It was weeks and weeks before they were all finished. Travelling is very uncomfortable in England, all get into the same carriage with you, and no receipt for boxes, so if they are lost, how can one claim?

'Then we returned to London last week, and I told Alfred, "Now I am going to Daresfield." At first

he made a great fuss, and said it was nonsense and no use, and that I did not know where the place was or what station. But I had not forgotten the address written under that picture in your album, for I looked at it again that night at Nandi. I just let him know I meant to get there somehow, so then he agreed and made a very complete arrangement. Alfred is a fine hand at making arrangement when he likes. He found it all out from a map, and then he was quite pleased, because there is a place on the line near Daresfield where he has a cousin living, and there is a good hotel and golf. So he settled he would play golf for two days and see his cousin, and I said yes, and I would go over one of the days to tell Mr. Dare the truth about you, for he would never hear it from anyone else, and even if it did no good, matters could not be made worse for you.

'So we went. My! your uncle is a nasty, cross old man! I drove up to the house in a hired gharry about three o'clock in the afternoon or half-past, and I had on my red dress and hat, and gloves with red stitchings, and stockings with red spots, and a red border to my handkerchief, and all very smart. What a grand house and compound, though looking bare this time of year! I would like to see it in hot weather; it must look very pretty. The manservant who opened the door was such an old crow; he said his master was ill and could not see me. I said, "But go and ask; this is very important." I thought if Mr. Dare was ill and going, perhaps, to die soon, it was still more necessary to see him because of his

will. The crow said again, "Not seeing anyone." I told him it was about Mr. Stephen Dare, and did he remember you? At once he got civil. Your name was magic. "Nothing wrong with Mr. Stephen, I hope, ma'am?" he asked. "Something that perhaps can be put right, if your master will see me," I said, mysterious on purpose.

'Then he asked me to wait in the drawing-room, but I said I would stay in the hall, and I looked at the pictures and china and armours till he came back with a sour face as if he had been given abuse; but he took me along through the house, my! so cold and stiff inside and looking worn-out, and we went through a large glass-door on to a sort of chabutra place, all stone, just like the photo in your book. By the stone railing there was a bath-chair with the hood up and your uncle inside. He looked like a white vulture. The servant said he had been very ill and not to stay long. The old man had on a soft, black hat, and a black and white check muffler round his neck, and knitted gloves on. I felt rather nervous, but then I thought of you and all he had made you suffer, and I went straight up to him and sat down on a stone seat just opposite the chair. The man who had been wheeling went away to the end of the place, and left us alone. I explained I had come from India and knew you, and had something to tell him that he could not know unless somebody did tell him, as you would never speak to save your life, and had no idea I was doing it.

'He was very cold and haughty, and said he

supposed you had been doing something shameful and turning out like your father. I said no, not at all, that it was *he* who was doing something shameful. Then I did not wait for him to speak, and went on, and told him how you had done so well in your profession, that you were picked out for Nandi aqueduct, though you were junior for the charge, and that just as you had gathered enough money to come home all the trouble happened to your mother, and you had given her every rupee you possessed and more. And ever since then you had been sending money, sending money, only keeping just enough to live upon, with nothing for furlough or old age, and that you had to apply to be left at Nandi—such a dreadful place and so lonely!—all because anywhere else it would cost more to live. And I told him how desolate you were and how you were getting like an old man and dull, and all your life was being wasted, and it would have to go on for ever if he would do nothing.

'Oh! I tell you I drew a true picture; I said lots more than I can write, and the only thing I left out was about the native woman and the child. That I did not tell him—what was the use? It might only have made his heart harder. I talked and talked, and all the time he said nothing, and just glared at me with eyes like a mongoose glittering. Then at last I told him, "And here you are, an old old man, and ill, and perhaps going to die, and you a clergyman and all, and yet so wicked and selfish. Are you not quite ashamed to think that you are keeping this nephew of yours, who is so good and

handsome and sacrificing, down in the dust of poverty? He will die in India, and his life, which might have been so bright and useful, will be no good, except to his mother and her second family. You do not want your money. How can you spend it on yourself, or keep it, or let anyone else have it, when Stephen Dare deserves and needs all the help you can give him?"

'When I stopped to let him speak, I thought he was going to choke. He waved his hands at me in knitted gloves and clicked his false teeth together, and, for some time, he could not get out a word. Then at last he shouted in a hoarse voice: "Go, woman, go!" I said, "All right, all right, I will go; but remember that all I have told you is true talk, and it is *your* fault that your nephew's life is ruined —yours, and nobody else's." And with this I made him a bow and went. I heard him calling out in a little, high voice, and the man ran to him, but I did not wait. I went back through the house and out at the front-door by myself, and got into my carriage and drove away.

'So there is the tale of how I saw your uncle, and I think I got the best of it, though perhaps it was lucky for me that he was ill and helpless! Now, being in weak health and suffering, he may think over what I told him, and send you some money or burn the wicked will he made leaving you nothing. This all happened only yesterday, and now I am quite tired with so much writing and thinking, for it has been a great trouble to get it all down on paper, and I have hurried to catch the mail day. I am no

good at letters. Sue was always the one for writing, but then she never talked.

'I remain,

'Always your true friend,

'LOO SKINNER.

'P.S.—I shall be so glad when it is time to go back to India. I cannot endure this England, but Alfred says stay till autumn.'

Stephen laid the letter down on his knee and for a few moments he was silent. Then he laughed as he had not laughed since he came to Nandi, for a man who is much alone seldom laughs at all. He imagined Loo Skinner, prompted by the kindest and most serious of motives, attacking his Uncle Dare face to face, and uttering home truths such as never before had assailed the old gentleman's ears. Loo, vulgar and assertive in her red gown and hat, with the gloves, stockings, and handkerchief *en suite*, her elaborately-curled fringe, her loud chi-chi voice. He pictured his uncle's expression of furious surprise, the gesticulating hands in their knitted gloves, the angry clicking of the false teeth. Oh! if he could only have been present. Poor Loo! he was sorry she had gone to such useless trouble and expense on his account; for nothing would be likely to change old Mr. Dare's intentions towards himself, least of all an interview with Loo Skinner.

The old man had never shown him the slightest affection; had never been interested in his doings except to find fault with them; had never even betrayed gratification when he passed his examina-

tions, and established his own independence. Always Edward Dare had been coldly civil, automatically punctual in his payments for his nephew's support and education as long as it was necessary; but sympathetic, fatherly, friendly to the boy never. Was it probable, Stephen asked himself, laughing again, that the incoherent recriminations of an unknown and extraordinary female from India would have the faintest influence on Mr. Dare, except to infuriate him for the moment, and possibly to render him more than ever indifferent to the fate of his nephew?

The letter filled Stephen's mind for the rest of the evening. At intervals he laughed again, visualizing the scene on the terrace, and he read Loo's description of it many times. Then as he sat and smoked after his dinner, he thought of his uncle's illness, and wondered if the old man's end was near. A sharp nostalgia for the place disturbed him. He took down the battered album, and studied the fading photograph of the house. The flagged terrace, the gloomy rooms, the picturesque outbuildings, the rambling, matured gardens, had always been dear to him. Who would live there after the old man's death? Into whose hands would the property pass—the portraits, the curios brought by Dares from all parts of the world, the rare china, the tapestry in the 'big bedroom'? All would be sold, perhaps scattered, and in a few years the very name of Dare would doubtless be forgotten, save for the brasses and tablets in the chancel of the little church.

He closed the book, and deliberately checked his regret for the inevitable. Half aloud he quoted one of Muttroo's favourite proverbs: 'When the sparrows have picked up the grain, what is the use of regretting?' His mind had grown to resent mental disturbance of whatever nature, and was fast acquiring a habit of consideration for the hour only, which was almost Eastern in its fatalistic tendency. Sometimes he wondered, with a faint alarm, whether the mere fact of isolation in a foreign country could expose a man to the racial influences of the atmosphere — whether in his own case he were not unconsciously assimilating native traits and inclinations? He was helplessly aware of a growing inertia, which caused him to shrink from every effort that was not official or an absolute necessity. He was taking less exercise; he was becoming fond of native dishes; occasionally he caught himself thinking in Hindustani. If a trifle occurred which upset the leisured routine of his day it vexed him, he knew, altogether disproportionately.

He battled with this sense of annoyed reluctance a few mornings later when he saw a native runner crossing the compound with a yellow telegram in his hand. The man had come from Pari, the nearest telegraph-office, and the message must require immediate attention, if not exertion, for the colour of the envelope indicated that the contents were 'urgent.' Then, as he watched the brown figure coming nearer, a sudden possibility ran like a hot wave through his veins. What if Sunia were never coming back? What if death had freed him

from her? He fought down the sinister hope with shame. Of course the telegram was an official order, and, if not, it was probably to tell him that Sunia needed more money, or that the cart had broken down, or——

The coolie stopped at the foot of the veranda steps and salaamed low. He wore only a dirty wisp of red puggaree and a ragged loin-cloth; his dark, naked body shone with perspiration, for his skinny legs had carried him from Pari in an inconceivably short space of time.

'Backsheesh!' he cried, in a high nasal whine, and held out the yellow envelope.

Dare opened it, and the written words shot up to meet his eyes: '*Edward Dare died intestate—your presence necessary.*'

He stood in the veranda with the sun blazing on to his bare head and read and re-read the message. Its meaning seemed strangely difficult to grasp. He felt stupefied. Through the still, warm air came the plaintive bleating of a goat, and the memory of Sunia's sacrifice to Kali pushed itself persistently into the foreground of his mind, blocking his comprehension.

'Backsheesh! backsheesh! Protector of the Poor,' clamoured the coolie.

Stephen mechanically bade the man apply to the bearer for money, and stared vacantly after the bronze figure as it retreated towards the cook-house. He turned back into the centre room and sat motionless, the telegram in his hand, while the full significance of the message hammered itself into his

understanding, and he realized that Daresfield must belong to him as his uncle's heir-at-law and next of kin. But why should Edward Dare have 'died intestate'? He thought of Loo Skinner's letter. But to suppose that the interview on the terrace could have led to the destruction of the will seemed too fantastic a notion for serious consideration.

He ceased to conjecture, and made an attempt to shape his present plans. He must go home, of course, and at once. His month's pay was due, and on this occasion the usual remittance to his mother must stand over; the long-suffering bank would advance him what more he needed for his journey. Leave on 'urgent private affairs' was seldom, if ever, refused, taken once in a man's service, and could be sanctioned by telegram in twenty-four hours.

The dread necessity of looking beyond the immediate future need not yet be faced, and Dare closed his mind defiantly against problems to come. He argued that to consider them whilst he was still ignorant of his actual position would be useless and premature, for by the time he arrived in England a new will, or even the original document, might have been found. He knew nothing of his uncle's financial affairs, and possibly there was little or no money. Unexpected difficulties might well arise to make it imperative that he should return at once to his profession.

But at the least he was going home. For a time, at the least, he was to be free, to live as other men lived, to have a change—a glorious change. His

spirits shot up; he felt almost delirious with excitement. He could not make himself think connectedly, and he paced the room in a frenzy till Sally emerged from beneath the writing-table and whined interrogatively. Then a sudden weight of depression bore him down. He began to dread the inevitable effort, the active responsibility that was before him, to shrink even from such minor details as the packing, the letters, the telegrams, the explanations. And the question of Sunia was not to be evaded—the question that sooner or later must confront him as a most serious difficulty. He went so far as to wish that the telegram had never come; that his monotonous existence at Nandi might continue undisturbed, with the whispering river, the glaring white aqueduct, the silence, the space, the leisure.

He roused himself. A stiff whisky and soda presently stimulated his brain and helped to restore his self-command. He sat down and smoked quietly until he had got his thoughts into order, then he wrote to Joe Renny, privately to explain the situation, officially to tender his application for leave, with a request that it might be telegraphed to headquarters. He sent the packet by ekka into Pari, where, by good chance, the Executive Engineer had just arrived from camp, and two days later Stephen received sanction for his departure.

Then he summoned Muttroo, who as yet knew nothing of what had occurred. The old bearer entered with resentment. He had been about to enjoy his mid-day meal in comfortable undress, and a summons at such an unusual hour was highly

annoying. The sahib, he considered, should know better, and the wrinkled face below an untidily-arranged turban was severely reproachful.

'Your Highness called?' he queried crossly.

'Yes. Now listen, Muttroo: a telegram has come for me across the black water, which says that I must go to England. I must take leave and go without delay, not awaiting the return of Sunia-bibi, who cannot be here for yet many days, and I wish to give you orders concerning her, and concerning all that I leave behind me.'

Incredulous amazement promptly replaced Muttroo's ill-humour.

'Wah!' he exclaimed, with eyes and mouth wide open, and added anxiously: 'Will the Presence be long away?'

Dare hesitated.

'As yet I do not know,' he answered.

Muttroo rubbed one big toe on the other instep. Sorely distressed and bewildered, he tried to blink away the tears that welled into his sunken black eyes.

'Thou art my father and my mother,' he said with a sob. 'This slave will neither eat nor drink till he beholds the return of the sahib.' So with Oriental extravagance did he strive to express his regret at the coming separation from his master. 'Whatever thine Honour's orders, they shall be faithfully obeyed.'

'That is well. I start as soon as maybe, and the native subordinate will take charge here till another sahib is sent, which will happen quickly. The canal

bungalow and compound is Government property, therefore Sunia cannot continue to live here during my absence. What is to be done?'

Mnttroo considered deeply, swaying to and fro on one leg.

'There is Green Sahib's bungalow standing empty,' he suggested. 'The rent is small, and it belongs to a farmer in a neighbouring village. Him do I know well, and he will be grateful for a tenant. It can speedily be put in order. Whitewash and thatch, and a little repairing is all that is needed, and long before her return it could be ready. Her things can be placed there now without harm. The cane blinds, and the druggets, and the big cupboard, and the bed——'

'A good *bandobast* (plan),' said Stephen, much relieved. 'You will remain with her, and certain of the other servants also. Money will be left with you, and enough shall be sent each month till my return, when you will account for it. You will see that she wants for nothing. You can be trusted—that I know.'

'Sahib, assuredly!' he salaamed in grateful acknowledgment.

'And the dogs must be kept in Green Sahib's compound. Money will be supplied for them, too.'

A pang shot through him at the thought of leaving Sally.

'And the white mare?'

'The same arrangement. I shall ride her halfway into Pari, if Renny Sahib can send another

horse to meet me. The luggage can go ahead on an ekka.

Muttroo produced a bunch of keys.

'Huzoor, I will lay out all the clothes for inspection, and what is not needed for England can be packed away in the tin-lined box and taken over to the little bungalow before the new sahib arrives.'

Stephen submitted to this proposal, and selected from a shabby and limited wardrobe what he was likely to require. But he rebelled when requested to examine and make lists of his knives and forks, the house-linen, crockery, kitchen utensils, stable outfit, and even the dogs' brushes, chains and collars. He owned nothing of any value, and all would be safe enough in old Muttroo's faithful charge. During the next three days every hour was filled, for he wished to catch the earliest mail possible. Necessary letters were written, his work was brought up to date, official matters put in train for his successor, instructions given to the native subordinate, the little bungalow was taken and the repairs ordered, and one or two last inspections were accomplished. Books, pictures, ornaments were put away, and what servants he was not retaining were paid and dismissed with the usual written testimonials. There was little time for reflection, and the enforced, continued activity braced him mentally and physically.

On the last evening Stephen gave Muttroo a packet of envelopes stamped and directed.

'Take care of them,' he said, 'and every month, if all is well, post one to me, empty, just as it is. If anything be wrong, or there is aught to tell, get a

letter written by the village munshi, who knows enough English.'

And Muttroo carefully consigned the precious packet to the depths of a mysterious canvas bag that held a miscellaneous collection of valuables—buttons, scissors, tea and tobacco, keys that had deserted their locks, various empty tins, bottles, and boxes.

Now all was ready. The last letter had been written, the final instructions impressed on the native subordinate, reassuring messages and explanations for Sunia had been entrusted to Muttroo's memory. Nothing further remained to be attended to, and Stephen wandered out with Sally down to the river-side. The aqueduct glowed pink in the sunset; a flight of parrots flashed over it like a green comet; the chant of a villager rang high and plaintive through the lazy air. The Kali Nadi rippled and eddied softly, with a sound like a low laugh that seemed to Dare to mock him while he stood and remembered—remembered Sunia sleeping warm and brown in the sandy cleft; remembered the sweetness of her youth, her songs, her fondness, her seductions. Then the death-bed of the missionary, the baptism, the weird recitation of the marriage service, the noisy hopping of the frogs, the rain, the time that followed blurred with passion, the slow torture of the after-weariness and indifference. Then Maru, with his tiny neck and protruding stomach; and the tragic ending of the little life, here, close to the spot where he was now standing. Dare shivered and turned away. The Waters of Destruction rippled on in placid, treacherous calm.

He had arranged to start very early in the morning. At cock-crow Muttroo's figure blocked the doorway of his room. 'Sahib! sahib! sahib!' The old bearer roused his master with patient, persistent voice. Behind him flared the yellow sunrise; from the compound came the clamour of awaking life; the white pony waited, ready saddled, in the compound.

CHAPTER V

THE searching winds, and cold, clean showers of England's spring had swept and washed away the last traces of winter, and at Blew Park the grounds and gardens were green and eager with summer promise. This afternoon the sun shone with cheerful vigour, and none of the watery paleness that is perhaps more depressing than settled gloom; scraps of spar twinkled on the gravel-paths; beneath the trees the bluebells made a hovering, azure mist; the glad stir of busy, growing life, could everywhere be felt and heard. Even Sir Joshua Bail's stiff joints seemed easier and more actively inclined as he stumped past the three long drawing-room windows, clad in a shooting-coat with sagging pockets, cord breeches, and leather gaiters. He nodded condescendingly to his spinster sisters seated within—one at the kidney-shaped writing-table, and the other beside an unnecessary fire that burned brightly in the polished steel grate.

'Heavens!' said Ann Bail, staying her quill pen that had squeaked industriously since luncheon time, 'Joshua must have been over to Daresfield in those clothes, looking as though he were dressed for a cattle-show instead of for a visit of ceremony and condolence.'

Bella Bail raised her colourless eyes for a moment, but continued to knit in silence. Her face recalled the appearance of a paper bag that has been inflated and then allowed to settle again without bursting.

Sir Joshua opened the heavy drawing-room door —solid mahogany, humiliated by painted china shields and handles. Bella put a little woollen shawl up to her mouth.

'Come in quickly,' she said from behind it, in a muffled voice; 'pray do not admit the cold air.'

Cold was the horror of her life. Even on the hottest summer day she never ventured out of doors without precautionary goloshes and the Shetland shawl.

'You don't mean to say you have been over to call at Daresfield in those clothes, Joshua?' protested Miss Ann.

She was capable, vigorous, authoritative—a complete contrast to her younger sister.

Obstinate self-approval was expressed on Sir Joshua's somewhat vapid countenance.

'I have,' he answered truculently; 'and why not?'

'Well, considering it was a first call, and that old Mr. Dare has only been dead a month——'

'Nonsense! Why should I dress up because Edward Dare is dead, or to stand on ceremony with his nephew? If it comes to that, the feller's clothes were a sight worse than mine. By the look of 'em, he must have had 'em on ever since he went out to the East Indies!'

'What has he grown into?' inquired Bella, re-

moving the shawl, but speaking apparently without much interest.

'A man, of course. Did you expect him to come home an ayah or a monkey?'

Bella stared vacantly at her brother and pouched her cheeks, she seldom expressed her annoyance otherwise.

'Don't be ridiculous Joshua,' scolded Ann, and rubbed her pen vigorously with a black velvet pen-wiper that was intended to represent a cat. 'Of course what Bella wishes to ascertain is whether the young man has improved or deteriorated?'

'I don't remember what he was like before he went away.'

Sir Joshua chuckled, being one of those people whose idea of wit is to be intentionally exasperating; and he was well aware that his sisters were inwardly ravening for a full and particular description of Stephen Dare. He suspended his person above an armchair for a moment, and then dropped weightily on to the springs with a prolonged grunt. Miss Bail changed her seat and took up a missionary report. Bella knitted on with an extra bagginess of cheek. They both knew by experience that further interrogation would be futile until their brother volunteered the information they so eagerly awaited.

'I had a telegram from Georgie while you were out,' announced Ann, as though the subject of Stephen Dare had been dropped for ever. 'She will be here this evening. I have ordered the brougham to meet her at the station.'

'Ha!' cried Sir Joshua, 'Miss Georgie tired of

her yachting and her swell friends already? I thought she was to be away two months.'

'She *has* been away two months.'

'Gad! who'd have thought it? How time does fly! And who'd have thought, either, that it's five or six years since that Dare feller went off to the East hardly more than a schoolboy, and now here he is back with his skin the colour of a copper stew-pan, and a moustache, and the manner of a Methusalum.'

'*-lah*,' corrected Ann.

He ignored the correction, and paused expectantly. But his bait was not taken. After a short struggle he permitted his interest in the subject to stay the indulgence of his humour, and continued:

'Seemed dull, I thought. Nothing to say for himself, and I had to keep asking him questions. But I fancy he's a bit knocked about with the whole business. After all, he hasn't been there much more than a week, and it might easily take a man longer than that to get used to such a change. That's where it is you see' (a favourite utterance of Sir Joshua's).

'What did he tell you?' ventured Bella, and was unexpectedly rewarded with a rational response.

'He said he'd been shut up with lawyers and business ever since he arrived. It seems there's a lot more money than anyone ever suspected. Dare was a close fish. Always swore he was going into the workhouse. But that's just where it is with these parsons. Now if *I* were to say that, who d'you suppose would believe me? Heh?' with triumphant hostility.

'It would be extremely unpleasant for Stephen Dare if the will were discovered after all,' remarked Bella indifferently.

Sir Joshua shook his head.

'No chance of that; it's destroyed right enough. But it does look as if the old man had intended making a fresh one by his sending for his lawyer before he had that stroke on the terrace; then the feller arrived two late, and, of course, no one knows what Dare meant to do, because, you remember, he never got his senses back, though he did live on for another three weeks.'

'Yes; that stroke on the terrace,' said Bella, raising her eyes. 'Did you say anything to Stephen Dare about the mysterious visitor who was supposed to have caused it?'

'I kept clear of that subject. I thought it better, considering the report that the woman was in some way mixed up with young Dare. But whoever she was she did him a good turn, if it's a fact that her visit brought on the stroke which prevented his uncle making a fresh will. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good,"' added Sir Joshua profoundly, as though quoting Shakespeare.

'It is to be hoped that there is no undesirable marriage or entanglement in the background,' observed Miss Bail.

'If there is it can hardly remain hidden.' Bella spoke with the confidence of a detective. 'A scandal would be very unpleasant.'

Her pale eyes flickered for a moment.

'People are certainly talking,' said Sir Joshua.

'Goodall told me he had heard the woman threatened to shoot the old man, and that, when Hawkins sent for the police, she bolted. Then somebody else said she had nothing to do with young Stephen at all, but was a daugher of Edward Dare's wife, who left him half a century ago. I've never had a chance of asking Hawkins what actually did happen. I couldn't get hold of him at the funeral, and to-day, when I might have had a word with him, Stephen Dare saw me off himself.'

'When Dr. Morris came here last week to examine my ingrowing toe-nail,' began Bella, in a level, indifferent voice, 'I made a few inquiries of him. He was, of course, sent for when Edward Dare was stricken with paralysis. But he said the servants at Daresfield could tell him nothing beyond the fact that a strange-looking young woman had come to the house and insisted on seeing Mr. Dare, saying she was a friend of his nephew's. It appears there was a stormy interview, after which Mr. Dare was found helpless in his Bath chair, while the woman had left the premises.'

Ann Bail and her brother listened to this recital with attention.

'Why did you not repeat this to us before?' they questioned, though both were perfectly familiar with Bella's secretive habits.

'There is a time for everything,' she replied, and took advantage of the moment's triumph to extract answers from Sir Joshua to questions which held for her the deepest interest. Beneath her deceptively inanimate demeanour there lay a curiosity that was

insatiable, and nothing was too trifling for her investigation. She would make endless inquiries, though apparently without much motive or any particular anxiety for the replies, upon which she seldom commented. But she watched and heard and absorbed every detail around her, and Georgie Dalison, her niece, had once remarked, in a burst of impatience, that 'Aunt Bella possessed the barrel-organ of inquisitiveness.'

'In which room did Stephen Dare receive you?' she asked.

'He was in the hall when I drove up, and he took me into the library.'

'And what did he say then?'

'Oh, I don't know—something about the surprise of it all, I think.'

'Are the de Vitres coming to live with him?'

'I didn't ask.'

'Is the house going to be done up?'

'He didn't say so, but it's about time. Everything's falling to pieces.'

'How long were you there?'

'About half an hour, or perhaps three-quarters.'

'And where did Stephen sit?'

Sir Joshua's patience gave out.

'By Gad, Bella!' he exploded, 'you might be a child of six instead of an old maid of sixty! Did you never hear the saying that silence is golden, speech silver, asking questions brazen? I knew this would happen once you got an innings, so I asked young Dare over to luncheon to-morrow, and he can answer your infernal questions himself.'

Bella puffed out her cheeks, but continued to knit unmoved.

'Is he coming?' said Miss Bail.

'He said "No" at first, but I wouldn't take a refusal.'

'Georgie will be here,' remarked Ann thoughtfully. 'They used to be great friends before he went out to India; but I rather interfered, I remember, for she was little more than a school-girl, and circumstances were different. Now, if there is no unfortunate impediment, I shall not interfere if they appear attracted to one another.'

'Oh, Georgie wouldn't look at a feller who hasn't a word to say for himself. And perhaps Stephen Dare has got a black wife and a drab family in India. As Goodall said to me when we were at Petty Sessions the other day, that's just where it is with these young men who come into property unexpectedly—you never know what encumbrances they mayn't have saddled themselves with; whereas a man who is sure of being somebody generally takes care to marry decently if he marries at all.'

'I consider,' said Miss Bail, with asperity, 'that a man who knows he must succeed to a property is quite as culpable in not marrying at all as in marrying undesirably.'

Sir Joshua's determined bachelorhood was one of the two great regrets of Miss Bail's existence—the other had been the marriage of the little sister born when the Miss Bails were already grown-up young ladies of twenty and twenty-five. The birth of this belated infant had cost Lady Bail her life, and forty

years ago the ordering of the Blew Park establishment had devolved upon Ann Bail as the eldest of the family. She had executed her duties with characteristic zeal from the moment that they became hers, and the household had been managed with a power of organization that would have won fame for a general officer.

Old Sir Joshua—coarse, stupid, ill-tempered—had been humoured and considered, but carefully preserved from marrying again (his fancy for the pretty widow at Daresfield had been his last matrimonial attempt), until his death occurred, twenty years after that of his wife. The son of the house, now old for his age at sixty-two, had been served, indulged, defended, as the male representative of the name, in all that spirit of blind sacrifice for which old county families are notorious, often to their destruction. But Ann had failed to persuade Joshua to marry, and had found no husband for Bella, and the matrimonial plans she had laid for little Minnie in the county were frustrated by the girl herself, who wilfully chose a soldier acquaintance of her brother Joshua's. There was nothing to Captain Dalison's discredit beyond that he was in no way connected with the Bails, and had first come to Blew Park on a casual shooting visit, almost as a stranger. The marriage was therefore grudgingly permitted, and Minnie wandered over the world with her husband and his regiment until she died of fever at Malta, leaving a daughter, Georgiana, aged sixteen.

The child had always been consigned to Blew Park when her parents were not in England, and,

after her mother's death, the place continued to be her headquarters until two years later, when her father retired and settled in London. Then, at intervals, she paid long visits to the uncle and aunts in the old country home, appreciating the space, the rest, the leisure, as an occasional relief from her strenuous London life, and, on the sudden death of Colonel Dalison, when Georgie was twenty-one, Blew Park had become her recognised home. She came and went as she pleased, forming the one element of youth and progress in a dwelling that was stagnant with the atmosphere of a passing generation, and dull with the bygone habits and prejudices of three old people and their staff of elderly retainers.

'A marriage with Stephen Dare would be most suitable for Georgie, provided, of course, there was nothing objectionable in the way,' continued Miss Bail, without reserve. 'It is exactly the sort of match I desired for her mother, instead of a marriage with a nobody in the army, even though he was so comfortably off. The Dares are connected with the Bails!'—this as if the fact elevated the name of Dare to almost royal rank.

'I am glad Georgie is coming back this evening,' she went on; 'she is too fond of staying with her father's wealthy relations, and I am always apprehensive that she may marry some person we could not approve of—this Mr. Kane, for instance. She has mentioned him several times in her letters, and, for all we know, he may belong to the sauce people—Kane's sauce.'

'She don't seem in any hurry to marry at all,' said Sir Joshua. 'She's turned twenty-two now, isn't she? Quite right; marrying late is next best to not marrying at all.'

The entrance of the tea-tray checked the reproaches which this sentiment would otherwise have drawn from Miss Bail, and for a time she was closely occupied in buttering pieces of toast for her brother, and pouring his tea into a 'moustache cup' that was almost as large as a slop-basin.

Long before the early summer evening had faded into twilight, the shutters all over the house were carefully closed and barred, curtains drawn, outer doors locked and bolted, and the consequential butler had staggered into the drawing-room bearing two tall moderator lamps with frosted globes that shone like planets in the lofty gloom. Georgie Dalison's attempts to introduce softening shades had met with no success.

'We like to be able to see what we are doing, and who comes into the room,' said the Miss Bails firmly; and the lamps continued to glare undimmed as they had glared ever since the aunts could remember.

The sudden, crude radiance half blinded Miss Dalison as she opened the door leading from the badly-lighted entrance hall, and she hesitated for a moment on the threshold—a figure strikingly vivid and modern in contrast to the stiff precision of the early Victorian room, with the two elderly ladies in plain silk gowns, alpaca boots, and home-made caps, seated—'not too near the fire'—the elderly gentle-

man with velveteen coat and obsolete whiskers dozing in a vast armchair behind a wool-work banner-screen.

How distinct from the atmosphere she had quitted that morning with its mental activity, its ready availment of modern advantages, and all that life has to offer, its brilliance and refinement of pleasure! But though the girl was fully sensible of the difference, she felt neither intolerance nor discontent. She said she was glad to be back, and she spoke the truth, for she was loyally attached to her old-fashioned relations and the home where she was always so welcome. Contact with the rich, cultured, and progressive world to which her father had belonged, had done nothing to spoil her—rather had it heightened her intelligence, matured her understanding, and added strength to a character that was by nature sweet and true. Moreover, to it she probably owed the effective finish of her appearance, for while the interesting face and perfection of colouring must have arrested attention under any conditions, it is to be doubted whether, had she been reared under the sole guidance of the excellent Aunt Ann, she would have discovered the value of skilful hair-dressing, or recognised the importance of style, of judicious discrimination in the choice of hats and gowns, besides the true art of wearing the same. An agreeable, attractive girl, with a generous heart, an unprejudiced mind, and a capacity for seeing from the point of view of others which made her a fascinating companion and a priceless friend.

Miss Bail was the only member of the elderly trio in the drawing-room who was really awake when Georgie arrived. She was enchanted to recover her niece, but scolded her for coming by a train which necessitated the postponement of the dinner-hour. Bella sat up and put her cap straight, composed her cheeks, and began to ask questions. Sir Joshua heaved himself from his chair, welcomed her noisily, and stood with an affectionate, heavy hand on her shoulder. Georgie replied to each in turn, and then, throwing off her wrap, made investigations on her own account. Everything appeared to be most satisfactory. Aunt Ann had had no further trouble with the under-housemaid; Aunt Bella had got through the trying spring weather without a chill; Uncle Joshua had been wonderfully free from rheumatism; and the fruit and hay prospects were excellent. The only excitement in the neighbourhood at present was the arrival at Daresfield of young Dare from India.

'Oh, then, he is there?' said Georgie, with interest. 'Your last letter only said he was expected.'

Bella noticed that the colour deepened slightly in her niece's cheeks.

'He is still a bachelor, apparently,' she observed, and gazed at Georgie, who promptly declared that she was glad to hear it, for in her modest opinion it was a pity for a man to marry too young.

'And what about a woman?' said Sir Joshua, in the indulgent tone that is usually adopted to give encouragement to a child.

'Oh, a woman should marry whenever she has a good chance, of course,' laughed Georgie; and Ann Bail remembered Mr. Kane and the possible family condiment with renewed misgivings. 'I am so glad Mr. Dare has got the place after all. Did you think him much changed, Uncle Joshua?'

'Now I'm not going to be catechized about the feller,' protested Sir Joshua. 'I asked him over to luncheon to-morrow on purpose to give Ann and Bella a chance of staring at him and asking him questions, so now you'll be able to join in. I wouldn't take his refusal, so that's where it is.'

The dressing-gong echoed harsh and loud through the stone passages and hall. Georgie's face was grave and thoughtful as she went upstairs to her bedroom, which was antiquated like the rest of the house—long and low with a monstrous four-post bed, vast, polished wardrobes, and a round table in the middle that would have dined ten with ease; but its three wide windows overlooked the park, its chintz-covered chairs and couches were broad and comfortable, and it contained the accumulation of Georgie's personal belongings since the days of her childhood. Her maid was unpacking her boxes when she entered. Tall wax-candles were burning on the dressing-table; she missed the electric light, and kindled another pair on the mantelpiece which was covered with a mass of little ornaments dating from some eighteen years back to the present time—china figures and animals, mugs, vases, shells, boxes, silver knick-knacks, pictures, photographs. Among the latter was one of a very young man in flannels

with fair hair and curiously light eyes. She took it up and examined it attentively.

'I wonder if he has forgotten?' she said half aloud; and was embarrassed by 'Beg pardon, miss?' from the maid.

'Nothing,' she answered; and glanced with a whimsical smile at her own reflection in the gilt-framed mirror.

That night when she went to bed she added another photograph to the gallery on the mantelpiece—that of a good-looking man with a big nose and calm eyes, a dark, neat moustache, and hair that was tipped with gray above the ears. Aunt Ann, in a maroon-coloured dressing-gown and felt slippers to match, immediately remarked it when she came to bid her niece good-night.

'Who is this?' she inquired.

Georgie turned round from the dressing-table.

'That? Oh, that's Mr. Kane.'

Miss Bail placed her broad silver candlestick on the round table, and seated herself with determination.

'Now, Georgiana, tell me truthfully—does he belong to the sauce people?'

Georgie laughed.

'Have I ever told you a lie, Ann—aunt? Truth compels me to own that he does.'

'My dear child——'

'Wait a moment—just wait till I've finished this plait—there——' She came, a little later, and sat by the table, a dainty, fragrant presence in a silk wrapper, her crisp brown hair brushed off her fore-

head and hanging in two thick ropes down her back. 'Now you shall know all about Stafford Kane, dear,' she said, her elbows on the table and her chin resting in the pink palms of her hands. 'I said nothing very particular about him in my letters to you because of Bella' (she thus irreverently alluded to her second aunt). 'He is very charming, very rich, very clever, and he wants me to marry him.'

'The impertinence——'

'Call it sauce,' suggested Georgie. Then she continued more soberly: 'His grandfather was the culprit—an old gourmet from India, a merchant, who invented the sauce and made stacks and tons of money with it. So it's not so bad after all, is it?'

'Of course it *might* be worse,' said Miss Bail, with reluctance. 'But I confess I am disappointed. I had hopes that you might marry someone who is not an utter stranger to us.'

'Anyone in particular?' asked Georgie, with interest.

'There is now a great change in Stephen Dare's position——'

'Aha! When he was poor and without prospects I was a naughty little girl to flirt with him, and you threatened to send me back to school and tell my father, and make things generally disagreeable. Now that he is Dare of Daresfield you want me to marry him. You are a worldly, depraved old woman.'

'Of course, Georgiana, I only wish you to marry for your own happiness——'

'But I don't know that I am going to marry at all,' said the girl calmly. 'The situation is this: I have known Mr. Kane ever since I went to live with father in London, but I never saw very much of him until this last year. I have always liked him. He is sensible and good-tempered, and knows how to do things; a man one would never feel ashamed of, and he has plenty of brains and character. He was on the Stevensons' yacht. Lady Stevenson adores him, but he seemed to prefer my society, which made matters a little difficult, though naturally more exciting, and then just before we landed he proposed to me.' She paused. 'I refused him.'

Aunt Ann became breathless.

'But he persuaded me to think it over, and he was so nice and peaceful about it all, I felt rather glad he had refused to be refused. He is going to write—later. And if I tell him to come down here, why then, I suppose, he will ask me again and I must accept him. But if I say I don't want to see him he will know that I have definitely made up my mind not to marry him. He has promised not to write for six weeks.'

'I trust that your decision will prove a wise one, my child, whatever it is;' and Miss Bail kissed her niece with a bristly lip, and much real tenderness of feeling.

When she had gone, Georgie dragged back the heavy curtains from all the windows and flung up the sashes. She leaned out on one of the broad window-sills, and closed her eyes in pleasure at the cool sweetness of the night air; and presently,

through the rustling of the trees, she seemed to hear the lazy swish of the sea against a vessel's side; she listened to the low, firm tones of a man asking her to be his wife; she saw the steady gaze, the carefully-tended moustache between the prominent nose and slightly-supercilious chin, the well-groomed head bent with studied deference towards her. Then suddenly blotting out the vision came the memory of a boy's eager blue eyes and heedless, immature love-making—a hasty clandestine farewell in the summer-house at the end of the shrubbery—the kiss, furtive, inexperienced, tearfully returned——

She opened her eyes.

'To-morrow,' she thought. And once again with a little unwonted tremor of anticipation: 'I wonder if he remembers!'

CHAPTER VI

THE luncheon hour at Blew Park was one o'clock. Not all Georgie Dalison's protests and persuasions could alter it.

'You don't finish breakfast till nearly ten,' she had argued a hundred times. 'You can't want to eat again at one. Besides it leaves the most horrible hour of the whole day on your hands—between two and three!'

She obtained but one answer to her appeals: 'The servants!'

And so 'the dining-room' continued to sit down at one o'clock precisely to an abundant meal, while the bell for the 'hall' dinner rang at half past. Therefore Stephen Dare had been invited to arrive at a quarter to one, and he was punctual. He found Bella Bail seated alone in the drawing-room, looking much the same as he had always remembered her, though her pouchiness and vacancy seemed more pronounced. She greeted him without the least animation—it might have been a week instead of nearly six years since their last meeting—and inquired if he had come in the dogcart? Had he felt the wind cold? Which road had he taken? Had the Park gates been opened by Mrs. Meek or

her daughter from the lodge? etc. Ann Bail, on the contrary, when she entered, gave him a hearty welcome, congratulated him frankly on his good fortune, commented on his changed appearance, and was briskly hospitable. Sir Joshua, straight from the stables, friendly and jocular, was much interested concerning the past and future of the young groom who had accompanied Mr. Dare with the dog-cart, because 'the feller' had begun his career as stable-boy at Blew Park.

Georgie Dalison, when she came in rather hurriedly, hesitated for a second on the threshold, seeing Stephen in the centre of the little group. His face was familiar, and yet so curiously different, now strengthened and developed with manhood. It was like meeting the elder brother of the boy she remembered. But his hair was the same, close and yellow, with a tendency to ripple, and when he turned and looked at her standing in the doorway, she saw that his eyes were just as blue as of old.

'You know my niece, Miss Dalison,' she heard Aunt Ann say; and as she shook hands with Stephen, and they exchanged little polite remarks, she was dismayed and angry to discover that she suddenly felt artificial and self-conscious.

They went in solemnly to luncheon. Sir Joshua faced a plateau of cold salt beef and a pigeon-pie; Ann Bail began vigorously to carve a couple of chickens; veal cutlets steamed in front of Georgie, and a glazed tongue arched itself before Bella and the guest.

'I fear we have no curry to offer you,' said Miss

Bail with regret; 'but chickens will perhaps prove a pleasant change.'

Stephen puzzled the company by his almost vehement preference for salt beef. He might have explained that, having eaten practically nothing but chickens for the last three years, he never wished to see another; but he shrank from opening the subject of India. However, he was not to escape. His voyage was discussed; then the Indian climate; the reptiles, the insects, and wild beasts of the country.

'And no doubt you can tell me,' said Ann Bail, 'whether the missionaries make any real headway in India? My sister and I have subscribed for years to the Church Missionary Society. We take a deep interest in the conversion of the heathen.'

'I'm afraid I know very little about it,' said Stephen; and the thought of Abel Tod swept through his mind like a cold wraith. 'I—I believe the missionaries are very earnest and hard-working, and make enormous sacrifices for their cause.'

'Oh, yes; that goes without saying. But are the sacrifices and the hard work in vain?'

'I shouldn't think so, said Stephen vaguely.

'Have you ever known a native convert to Christianity?' inquired Bella, who, if there was an unpleasant question that could be asked, always contrived, intentionally or otherwise, to ask it; though on this occasion she was innocent of malice.

Stephen flushed uncomfortably, and a sense of resentment rose within him. Seated at the prosaic English luncheon-table, eating cold salt beef, listening to the old ladies' parlance, trying to realize that

Georgie Dalison was actually opposite to him in the flesh, he felt that he might surely have been allowed to shake off the past, for the time, at least. Yet now the recollection of Sunia waiting for his return in the little bungalow beside the aqueduct, Muttroo careful and conscientious in his charge, the Kali Nadi, even the white mare and the dogs, all seemed to be clamouring to him of their claim. Not for a moment was he to be permitted to forget. . . . He suddenly became aware that Miss Bella Bail was gazing at him in placid expectation of an answer to her question.

'Yes,' he said, as unconcernedly as he could; 'I have come across one or two. But,' he added in haste, seeing Bella's mouth open to emit further inquiries, 'I can tell you nothing about them;' and he turned the subject by mentioning that he expected the de Vitres at Daresfield the following week.

This lead to much question and answer. Yes; it was true that his stepfather was hopelessly blind; it was, of course, a terrible misfortune, and a great grief to his mother; she was not at all strong, and he hoped the change would do them all good; they were to make their home at Daresfield, if they liked to do so; there were four children, two girls and two boys; the boys were at school, the girls would be coming with their parents; one was thirteen, the eldest of the family, the other, the youngest, was nine; the boys came between.

'And are they all Roman Catholics?' asked Bella.

'I believe they are.'

There was a shocked silence, which was broken by Sir Joshua.

'That reminds me,' he said: 'what are you going to do about the Daresfield living?'

'I wish,' said Ann, 'that you would give it to Mr. Jenkins, the little man who has been taking the duty since your uncle's first illness in the winter. He is a poor curate with a family. His wife was one of the Rorkes—a good name, but no money. Why they allowed her to marry him I can't imagine—except that there were seven daughters, and all so plain.'

'They each took a vow when they grew up that they would accept the first man who proposed to them,' said Georgie, 'which I really think, under the circumstances, was very wise; and they are all married, the whole seven.'

'Georgiana, how can you repeat such gossip?'

'It was Aunt Bella who told me,' said Georgie demurely. 'But let us return to Mr. Jenkins.'

'I had thought of offering him the living,' said Stephen; 'but I was waiting to consult someone. I feel rather at sea about everything at present.'

'Well, you won't do better than Jenkins,' said Sir Joshua; 'he's an energetic, God-fearing little feller, and he roars at the people from the pulpit, which is just what they like. It'll make a hole in your pocket, Dare, not being able to run that part of the show yourself, like your uncle; but I dare say you won't feel it. Now, there's another thing I wanted to tell you: you ought to take the 'ounds.' For some unknown reason Sir Joshua always spoke of

'ounds and 'orses. 'I hear Spalding wants to give 'em up, and can't very well do so till the right substitute is found. He was saying only yesterday, when I met him on my way home from Daresfield, that they think you'd be the very feller. Plenty of time, and money, and room, young enough to be keen, and not too young to do the business properly. There's nobody else to come forward if you don't.'

Georgie saw Stephen's eyes glisten with pleasure, but only for a moment. She noticed that he checked with an effort the eager reply that rose to his lips.

'I couldn't decide anything this year,' he said, with reserve. 'I must get all the Daresfield affairs into order first, and it will take some time. My uncle left things in rather a mess, which seems unlike him, but I suppose he had been feeling ill for some time, and he was an old man. Then I haven't retired yet from my Indian appointment, and at the end of my six months' leave I shall probably go back to settle up things and hand over my charge officially. I came away at a moment's notice, you see.'

'Ah!' said Sir Joshua, with apparent comprehension, 'of course, that's just where it is. Well, then, when everything's straight, you'll have to begin and do your dooty by the county. We shall want you on the bench, and we must make old Spalding just hang on till you're ready to see about the 'ounds. You might even think of coming forward at the next election, eh?'

'Oh, that's a long way off,' said Stephen, rather helplessly.

He was still drugged with the influence of the years that lay behind him. He had not yet forced himself to realize the magnitude of the change that had revolutionized his life.

Georgie Dalison looked at him with attention. What had happened in India? Something that had starved the man's spirit and left an impress on him that would not easily be effaced. She felt keenly sorry, with a quick, almost jealous sympathy that completely brushed away the fit of shyness so unusual to her; and, after luncheon, with an intuitive desire to protect him from the questions and advice he seemed to dread, she proposed that they should visit the garden together while he smoked.

Miss Bail readily assented to the suggestion. She had not relinquished the hope that Stephen Dare might yet interfere with Mr. Kane's intentions towards her niece, and there was subtlety in her announcement that she had letters to write, if Mr. Dare would excuse her. Sir Joshua repaired to the library where he was in the habit of evading 'the most horrible hour of the whole day' by slumbering noisily.

'That's a rum feller,' he remarked to himself, as he sank into his shabby, leather armchair; 'seems almost as if it hurt him to talk.'

Bella carried her knitting to a sofa in one of the drawing-room windows, a place she usually avoided on account of the draught; but it so happened that the situation commanded an extensive view of the grounds, and, for once, with her shawl well up round her neck, she determined to risk a chill. Her faded

eyes sedulously followed the young couple crossing the lawn in the sunshine, and even her thin, unimaginative soul was stirred with a faint appreciation of their comeliness.

They made a pleasing vision in their youth and symmetry. The man, tall and fair, with ruddy bronze of skin, and the supple strength of outline that comes of good proportions and physical activity; the girl, slender, graceful, glowing in her contrasting type of beauty, moving at his side with easy carriage and the little well-bred confidence of manner that was peculiarly her own.

'Now, I wonder what they are talking about,' murmured Bella.

Without removing her gaze from the window, she pulled a wool-work stool from beneath the sofa, to support the alpaca-shod foot that was afflicted with the ingrowing toe-nail.

The duologue, could she have heard it, began with orthodox triteness.

'Everything must be so different after India,' said Georgie, with an effort, feeling that the remark was foolishly obvious; but her companion had seemed unwilling to open a conversation, and they could hardly continue to pace the lawn in silence.

He smiled slowly. It was as if no words could express how different he found it.

'It is all much the same here as before you went away,' she went on; 'the gardens and the park and the lake, and the aunts and the uncle. Only a few more creepers have climbed up the walls, and the

wisteria and magnolia trees are thicker—and we are all a little older.'

'*You* are not quite the same,' he said, with hesitation.

'Well, I was only a child when you went to India. One can't expect to remain always seventeen, unfortunately; I have grown up, and so have you.'

She glanced at him furtively. There were lines about the vivid blue eyes, a patient hardness in the mouth and chin. Again she queried jealously what had been the history of those years in India? He had set forth a light-hearted boy, full of enthusiasm, garrulous with youth and animal spirits, gaily confident and self-assured. He had returned a silent, inscrutable man, with a hopeless finality of manner, obviously oppressed by bitter experience.

They moved over the thick, smooth grass together. The quiet force of the girl's presence soothed, while yet it attracted Dare disturbingly.

'Everything, in a way, looks different,' he said, as though with a certain mental effort; 'but I suppose it is I really who have changed. I feel as if I were walking in my sleep. They say it is the unexpected that always happens; but I think if that was true, most of us would be raving lunatics. An unexpected upheaval of one's life is most unbalancing.'

'Then you were sorry to have to come home?' she asked, rather wistfully.

He turned to her with sudden energy.

'Sorry? Good God——'

He ceased abruptly, and walked on, without speaking, till they reached the shrubbery.

The rhododendrons were coming into bloom; rich masses of purple, crimson, and white; handfuls of colour piled upon the dark green foliage. They plunged in amongst the fragrant brilliance, walking in single file along the narrow, mossy path, and Georgie held the silence at bay with disjointed fragments of talk, uttered over her shoulder to the quiet figure behind her. Then she, too, was smitten dumb, as a quick turn of the pathway brought them to the summer-house that stood, smothered with ivy, in a sheltered clearing. Involuntarily she turned as though to retrace her steps, and their eyes met warmly. The memory of their parting was almost like a sound that was audible to them simultaneously. There was a moment's breathless pause. Then Georgie stepped up to the hut and peered through a little window that was half-choked with the ivy.

'There is nothing to see inside,' she said composedly, 'except spiders and an old croquet box.'

And she quickly pioneered him down another path that led them to the unromantic region of gardeners and greenhouses.

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Instead of returning to Daresfield when he left Blew Park that afternoon, Stephen drove for miles along the country roads without regard to distance or direction. The rapid movement quieted the tumult in his heart, and held his thoughts in check, and the free, sharp trotting of the brown mare, the rich luxuriance of pasture and cultivation through which he passed, the peaceful, prosperous villages, the commons gold and white with gorse and blossom,

gave him a comparative sense of comfort. He would have liked to drive till nightfall, but the mystified little groom and the mare must be considered, and already, when he drew up at his own front-door, the former was showing signs of distress, though with the willing courage of good breeding she would have trotted till she dropped. Dare laid a remorseful hand on her wet shoulder.

'Poor old girl!' he said, 'it shan't happen again;' and she turned her muzzle to him as though in graceful acknowledgment of his compunction.

He went into the silent entrance-hall and stood by the heavy oak table, mechanically drawing off his gloves. The doors and windows stood open everywhere—a concession to his Indian habits, strongly disapproved of by Hawkins—and cool, sweet scents from flower-beds mingled with the musty odours of the old house. He could see into the panelled smoking-room, the oldest part of the building, with its low ceiling and wide fireplace; into the stern library, with its lining of bookcases and their brass-wire doors; into the inner hall, with its settees, its Spanish leather screen, and dark, indistinct pictures on the walls; and on beyond, into a corner of the stiff, unused drawing-room, with a glimpse of sunny terrace through a long French window. How often at Nandi he had recalled these familiar rooms, little imagining that he should one day actually enter them as master.

A curious sense of unreality was still upon him, the sonambulant sensation that he had experienced ever since his arrival. Once or twice he had moved

about the house, touching the furniture and the walls, saying to himself, 'It is mine—that is mine—it is all mine.' Now, with an added, restless longing he passed through the chain of rooms out on to the terrace, where Hawkins had placed the tea-things ready for his return. He lingered for a moment by the glittering table, and then went on to that end of the terrace from whence he could look over the grounds and the sloping woods to the square tower of the little church that rose from the foot of the hill. Many times he had remembered this particular view with a sense of regret that he was never to see it again, and now it was his to behold when he pleased for the rest of his life.

He sighed bitterly. It had all come too late. His inheritance, his money, his position were all worth little to him now compared with what they might have been. This afternoon the dormant love that had lain in his heart for Georgie Dalison had awoke and burst into active reality. At the moment when he had seen remembrance in her eyes, he had recognised tumultuously that she was the one woman he had always loved, that she was the one woman he should love till the end of his life. The thought of her frank, expressive face, her delicate dignity, her clear brown eyes, wrung his soul with regret. Why—*why* had he forfeited all his claim to real happiness? Why had he scattered his years to the winds, wasted and ruined his hopes? Now he must never try to woo her; never gradually, courteously, tenderly strive to win her perfect love and faith; never ask her to be his wife, and pass a

golden dream of engagement days until she should come with him to Daresfield as its reverenced mistress. What a full life might have been theirs, with nothing to mar the bright contentment—money in plenty, tastes in common, youth and health.

Then he violently checked his imaginings, and walked with sharp, impatient footsteps to and fro over the stone flags, telling himself that in any case Georgie would never have married him; that he was a conceited ass to think that she remembered their young attempts at love-making save with kind amusement; that with her evident experience of the fashionable world he must now impress her only as a dull, uninteresting specimen of the ordinary Anglo-Indian. But again her eyes rose before him clear and brown. In them he saw neither forgetfulness nor amusement, but something which told him that the girlish tenderness she had felt for him had remained with her, and might be quickened and developed into love. Standing again motionless on the terrace, gazing over the green, quiet landscape, listening to the faint stirring of the trees and the high, clear voices of the birds, there came to Dare the first distant murmur of a temptation that was to prove strong, subtle, insidious; that afterwards grew and fought, and argued, clamouring down his scruples, crushing his will within its grasp.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMER sunshine, confident, splendid, triumphant, charged full upon the terrace at Daresfield, heating to a glow the level flagstones, crumbling to dust the strips of mossy mould between the slabs. Great urns, filled with scarlet geraniums, blazed torch-like at measured intervals along the balustrade, and guarded the lichen-spattered steps that led on to stretches of grass ruled in broad lines by recent mowing. The slumberous, loitering afternoon atmosphere enwrapt the solid, gray house and tranquil grounds.

Charles de Vitre, Stephen Dare's stepfather, leaned back in his low basket-chair under the chestnut-trees at the end of the lawn, and absorbed the beauty around him with every sense but the one he had lost. His thin, sensitive hands touched the warm grass with lingering pleasure; he inhaled a multitude of mingled perfumes from flower-beds near by, massed in patches of brilliant colour; he listened with rapture to the sensuous humming of the bees.

> '"That is not water that hath not lotuses;
> That is not a lotus that hath not a bee;
> That is not a bee that hath not a hum;
> That is not a hum that ravisheth not the soul."'

Mrs. de Vitre, drowsing over her wooden knitting-needles and a heap of fleecy white wool, raised her head.

'What did you say, dear?'

'I only quoted some lines that came from a forgotten corner of my mind. How exquisite all this is! I can *feel* the colour everywhere.'

For a moment he put his hands to his sightless eyes.

The woman glanced at him swiftly, with the loving, passionate pity that was ever alight for him in her breast. She touched his knee caressingly.

'Oh, the happiness of seeing you here!' she said —'away from the stuffy little rooms and narrow streets, and the dulness and restraint. What it means to me I can't tell you!'

He turned his handsome, mobile face towards her. For his fifty years he was a singularly young-looking man, with classic features, and fine brown hair only now showing gray at the temples. He smiled contentedly, accepting his wife's expressions of thankfulness on his account as a perfectly natural outcome.

'It seems only yesterday that we came here,' he said reflectively; 'and yet it must be quite a month ago. Poor little home at Fulham! We got a lot of happiness out of it one way and another, didn't we? And the trouble might have been far worse if that dear, good son of yours hadn't come to the rescue.'

Mr. de Vitre's artistic, unpractical mind had failed to realize that but for Stephen 'the trouble' would

have meant starvation, and his wife had always skilfully disguised the unpleasant truth.

'I sometimes fear,' he added, 'that he gave up more than we knew in order to keep us going. I only trust my wretched helplessness didn't tax the boy too heavily.'

Mrs. de Vitre looked uneasy. The words caused old misgivings to stir beneath the crust of custom and silence that buried them. There rose in her mind the memory of the day when she had gone from Edward Dare's presence with a cheque in her hand for twenty-five pounds, and on her lips the words, 'I must write to Stephen. I must write to Stephen.' Since then the dominating love and anxiety for husband and children had ever forced down the haunting consciousness of her eldest son's self-sacrifice in India.

'He assured me from the very first that he could do it. There was never any protest or reluctance,' she said, in involuntary vindication.

'Oh, well, I suppose, like all Indian officials, he got good pay and could afford it; and he need never think of money again now, at any rate, lucky beggar! Only sometimes it strikes me as odd that he should hate India so viciously. He never speaks of the country if he can help it, never tells us anything about his life out there; and I have wondered if it could be because he was obliged to go short on our account, that was all.'

He paused and fumbled for his cigarette-case. His wife helped him, and lit the match, then brushed some shreds of tobacco from his coat. She said

nothing. At times she experienced a fierce curiosity to learn the history of her son's life in India, but an instinctive dread of what she might hear had made her shrink from asking him questions.

'I am sure,' went on Mr. de Vitre, 'I should have loved India. I often wished I could go there in my young days. The gorgeous colouring would have been something to remember for a lifetime. But that Philistine, Stephen, says he never noticed it—that everything out there looked the same colour to him, a dirty, dusty yellow, and the green of Old England is all the colour he ever wishes to see again.'

'Stephen has no artistic sense,' said Stephen's mother, smiling—'he never had. As a small boy he was always simple, manly, and reliable, but not the least imaginative, and he never could express his feelings. It is so curious to see him now, exactly the same in character, but with maturity and experience added.' She hesitated for a moment, then continued: 'You know, at first when he came home I was seriously alarmed about him. I thought India had sapped all his youth and vitality and spirit. But now a great deal of that moody indifference or reserve seems to have worn off, though he still gets fits of it now and then. And he does so love this place and the life! I think the girls have helped to brighten him up, too. They adore him. And when the boys come home for their holidays they will make things livelier still.' Mrs. de Vitre sighed with satisfaction. 'Oh! sometimes I can hardly believe it is all true, and I expect to see

Edward Dare appear and turn every one of us out of the house.'

'Stephen's wife will turn us all out of the house, sooner or later,' observed Mr. de Vitre.

'Of course, we must expect that, and I do hope he will marry.' She was now almost selfishly eager for her son's happiness, feeling, perhaps, that every additional joy in his life would help to compensate for whatever he might have suffered through her. 'If he does he will always be good to us and the children just the same, that I know. I hope Georgie Dalison will marry him.'

'The girl with the charming voice.'

'Yes; and she is equally charming in herself. He has seen a good deal of her since he came home, and I am certain he cares for her. They would make such a splendid pair. I remember Stephen talking about her to me before he went out to India, when she couldn't have been more than a schoolgirl. I believe Miss Bail put her foot down and stopped any love-making. Now I have no doubt she would be rejoiced to see her niece Mrs. Dare of Daresfield. The old ladies are coming over this afternoon to pay their first visit of ceremony. They have been waiting for settled weather, and now they have certainly got it. I laugh when I remember how they snubbed me in the old days, when their dreadful old father wanted to marry me. The present Sir Joshua reminds me painfully of his father. Here are Stephen and the girls. I wonder what they have been doing?'

Stephen crossed the terrace with a little figure in white muslin hanging affectionately on to each arm.

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'No. *You* will have
so lovely on a horse!'

'You are much too
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wistfully.

the kitchen fire. 'I love heat. If uncle Edward hadn't died I should have gone out to India to keep house for Stephen as soon as I was big enough. I want to go to India, and I shall get there somehow when I am grown up, even if I have to go as a missionary.

'You'd better stay in England,' said her father, 'where there are no poisonous snakes, no mosquitos, or plague, or cholera.'

'But no men,' said Margaret precociously.

'Margaret!' protested her mother. 'Now go in doors both of you, and get cool and tidy before the visitors arrive. The Miss Bails will be here soon. I hope Bella Bail will allow us to have tea out here, but she will probably say it is too draughty.'

'Is that dear, darling Miss Dalison coming?' asked Norah excitedly.

'Very likely,' returned her mother, 'but I am not sure.'

'She gave us a lovely time when Stephen took us over to tea at Blew Park,' continued the child, 'and she said we might call her Georgie. I love her. Don't you, Stephen? Stephen, are you asleep? When we went up into her room we saw such a funny old picture of you—when you were young, with your hair all sticking up, and your collar quite different.'

The blood rushed to Stephen's forehead, and he tilted his hat over his eyes.

'Go in, go in, children,' said Mrs. de Vitre, with intuitive interference; 'you are neither of you fit to be seen.'

They went reluctantly, and when they had disappeared, Stephen rose.

'I must go and clean up too,' he said; and as he sauntered across the grass his mother's eye followed him with affectionate sympathy.

'I have a feeling,' she told her husband, 'that if Georgie Dalison does come this afternoon he means to propose to her.'

'A man must be pretty certain of acceptance to propose in his own house,' said De Vitre.

'Oh, I don't for a moment think she means to refuse him. I have seen them together;' and Mrs. de Vitre rolled up her knitting with a confident air.

Neither of them had a notion of the real state of Stephen's mind as he left them and proceeded to the house with slow, careless steps. They would have been amazed to see him a few moments later pacing his bedroom with clenched fists and harassed eyes. Nothing did they know or suspect of the sleepless nights, the torment of heart and conscience; the poisoned memories which he endeavoured to escape by long mornings of hard work over the estate affairs, afternoons spent in amusing the children, avoidance of all but compulsory solitude; the resolutions, always broken, to stay away from Blew Park, to shun possible meetings with Georgie, to strangle the consuming insistent hunger for her presence.

He stood at his window, and watched for her coming down the long avenue of elm and beech-trees. Within him raged the torturing conflict that

was ever ready to seize him in its grip. Over and over again the same specious persuasions, the weary reasonings, the swaying arguments; the struggle against the irresistible longing to ignore that passage of his Indian life, known only to himself and to those who could conceive no moral difficulty in the present situation. Loo Skinner, who would only applaud his sense; Joe Renny, who remained unaffected by the private concerns of his bachelor assistants; Muttroo, who would consider provision beyond a modest amount for 'the low-born niece of a Hindu watchman' as criminal waste of money; Sunia herself, ignorant, superstitious, averse from him, who had understood nothing of the 'pooja' by the padre's death-bed, and would live for the rest of her days in pious, priest-ridden contentment, respected and conciliated as a wealthy widow. What man of the world would bid him hesitate, or blame him if he fastened down the hateful page and never looked into it again?

But below the subtle promptings ran the pitiless knowledge that he had permitted the padre to sanctify his union with Sunia as a justification of the indulgence he desired; and whether the nondescript ceremony was legal or not—a point that could easily be determined—appeared to him a minor consideration, for he knew that he had responded deliberately to the words of his nation's Church, with the intention of regarding the woman as his wife.

Though his religious views were inactive rather than non-existent, his ethical sense was strong, and he felt that to ignore the unprovable rite would be

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'I'm afraid I must w
Georgie indifferently.

'Well, if I'm not mist
wait long'

had hitherto been neglected brought them to the long, gray house without a reversion to the subject that had made Georgie's heart beat riotously beneath the outward calmness of her demeanour. Her inability to control her sensations exasperated her. She had not as yet admitted to herself that she cared for Stephen; she was trying to ignore the flame that had been kindled from the spark of her girlish fancy. She continued to pretend, with the ruthless egoism of one in love, that she was still in a state of uncertainty with regard to her feelings towards Stafford Kane—still 'thinking it over' till his letter, now nearly due, should arrive and necessitate decision. She could not but recognise that Stephen loved her; his moroseness melted in her presence, his old buoyancy of spirit returned, his eyes were eloquent. But even yet he gave her the impression of one carrying a secret burden on his mind. She had seen him lapse from cheerfulness into dejection without apparent cause, his laughter die down as though checked by recollection, a sudden clouding of his face in the middle of a sentence. Frequently she puzzled over this with an anxious concern for Stephen's sake, mingled with an unacknowledged foreboding for her own peace of mind in the future. During these last few weeks they had laughed, talked, argued, idled together; but throughout she had persistently blinded herself to the fact that she was but awaiting his declaration, and that, if it came, she must surrender to it.

At the square stone porch Miss Dalison and Sir

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'Your geraniums are
Bail jealously.
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Georgie, against whom t
Miss Bail descanted on
sugar in tea, and the ext
savoury sandwiches—whic
consumed with relish. Be
Mr. de Vitre

moustache cup, and then called upon his host to accompany him to the stables. Stephen presently left him there at his own request, deep in discussion with the old coachman concerning the merits of an aged carriage-horse that had come as a colt from Blew Park.

DARE hurried back to t
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went with them, but Mr
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'They are going over th
Bella was anxious to see
she had not been upstair
Mr. Dare's mother. Perh

'Not unless you want
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towards the house.

It was a relief to enter
room after the heat of tl
blinds had been drawn lc
the atmosphere was cool
de Vitre had pulled

careful hiding-places; the faded damask curtains were replaced by silken hangings, delicately embroidered, that for the last seventy years had lain folded in the bottom drawer of a bedroom chest.

Georgie sat down on one of the low, broad sofas.

'This room is delicious!' she said. 'I wonder what the aunts thought when they saw it. I expect they highly disapprove. I wish they would let me pull the drawing-room about at Blew Park. In old Mr. Dare's time this was just like ours; we used to drive over once a year for the flower-show, and all the old ladies came in here and sat round the walls, and rested, after they had inspected the tents. I can see them now.'

'The village has decided to have no flower-show this year out of respect for my uncle's memory, which is nice of them, especially as he was a shocking bad landlord.'

'You will make a great difference to them. Uncle Joshua is never tired of talking about all you are doing for the estate. He used to get so furious with old Mr. Dare because he would never spend a penny on the place.'

'He had a mania that he was going into the workhouse, when really he was exceedingly well off. But I believe when he first came into the property he had to cut down expenses for a time, owing principally to my grandmother's extravagance, and I suppose the habit grew on him. Then I'm afraid my poor father cost him a good deal, which was the reason why he never liked me. Whether he relented and destroyed his will, intending that I

mistress.' It seemed
to hear them. He sa
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she had taken from t
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his lips was the white
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Past and future were
India, Sunia, Nandi, M
days became remote, u
memory of a dream.

Suddenly she turned a
to say something about
hands; but the words
flushed, tremulous and re
that leapt from his eyes.
throbbed. Then abruptly
and Hawkins entered with

The old man hesitated,
not intruded at a critical
recovered his

empty envelope with an anna stamp upon it, addressed in his own handwriting to himself. And as Hawkins left the room, discreetly closing the door behind him, Stephen sat with the letters in his hand, gazing at the soiled, crumpled little envelope, the postmark, the familiar stamp, the address he himself had written at his office-table in the centre room of the Nandi bungalow, with Muttroo waiting expectant and attentive at his elbow.

Now he was violently recalled to the reality of the barrier he had raised between himself and a happiness free of reproach. It was as though an icy douche had drenched his heart. He felt numbed, bewildered, aghast at the situation; for he knew that practically he had avowed his love for Georgie, and that in another moment hers might have been confessed for him. He was conscious of the stir of her linen gown and the chink of her bangles as she moved her position slightly. He could not speak—could not look at her. His sight was nailed to the Nandi postmark, the Indian stamp, the recriminatory envelope.

The girl waited quietly, with anxious eyes upon her lover's face that but a moment before had been pleading, ardent, adoring. Now it was set and hard as a plaster cast. He said no word; made no movement to renew the little scene that Hawkins had interrupted.

She waited, discarding all pretence and self-deception. She loved him. And the force of her love made keen and acute her natural intuition. She felt that a great deal more than the untimely

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windows.

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Her manner was nat
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the terrace, followed by t
Norah to the window, ca
relief to them both

'I think it will be your turn to come and see me,' said Georgie. 'When will you both come?'

'To-morrow!' they shrieked in ecstasy.

Mrs. de Vitre interfered.

'I am sure Miss Dalison won't want to see you again so soon. If it is fine, perhaps—Saturday?'

'Yes; let them come on Saturday,' decided Miss Bail, who was fond of children.

'By ourselves,' stipulated Norah eagerly, fearful lest the treat should degenerate into a call with their mother, entailing best frocks, tea in the drawing-room, company manners.

Her frankness caused amusement, and then the little babel of leave-taking began. The Miss Bails quarrelled politely as to whether the carriage should be completely closed or left half open, and as usual Bella's placid persistence triumphed. They departed with the barouche closed and both windows up, the victor calmly impervious to her sister's complaints and protests.

Georgie and Stephen shook hands in silence. With wistful confidence she met his gaze. In it she recognised a passion of suppressed emotion, regret, entreaty; and with an aching heart she drove off with her uncle, while gaily answering the children's calls as they raced after the dog-cart down the avenue.

All the way home Sir Joshua was maddening. He inquired, with interest, if she and Dare had 'settled it up,' and paid no heed to her annoyed protests and denials. He observed, with explosive chuckles, that the big room over the hall would

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who lacked utterly the charm of manner and powers of converse which had attracted her to Stafford Kane; who was blunt of speech, a little awkward of movement, without particular distinction, culture, or acquirements. Nevertheless she loved him—loved his simplicity, his manliness, his strength. He was Stephen, the boy, who had first sounded for her the note of passion—Stephen, the man, for whom the vibration of that first sweet sound had now swelled into a perfect harmony.

As she sat looking out across the undulating slopes of grass in the park, where huge trees swept the ground, and purple distance glowed between their masses, a dread for the future fell upon her. She remembered the local gossip concerning the mysterious woman who had declared herself to be a friend of Stephen's, and whose audience with Edward Dare had left the old man speechless and helpless till his death. She recalled the whispers she had heard of the evil in men's lives; stories and scandals that had come within her own knowledge whilst mixing with the restless, strenuous world she left behind her when she came back to Blew Park.

'But I will forgive him anything—anything,' she sobbed, 'if only he will trust me.'

Then later she rose and went to the little bureau that had been her mother's, and sat down to write a letter. With hasty, trembling fingers she told Stafford Kane that she had made her decision irrevocably. She could not care for him—could never be his wife.

* * * *

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pitiless machinery of Indian administration, and now he would lie uncommended and forgotten in the little cemetery at Pari.

Stephen had always intended to invite the Skinners to Daresfield before their return to India. He had felt pleasure, as well as good-natured amusement, at the prospect of their acceptance, for he had a genuine regard for Loo, and always remembered that, indirectly, he probably owed his present position to her well-meant efforts. Now, of course, the visit was impossible and, perhaps, on the whole, it was as well, for there must have been difficulties to contend with. Mrs. Skinner would have needed explaining. Mrs. de Vitre might not have discerned the excellent qualities that lay beneath Loo's remarkable manners. Hawkins would have recognised her as the mysterious lady who had provoked his former master to the point of paralysis. It would have been necessary to extract a promise from Loo herself to remain silent concerning the sacrifices, as well as the errors, of his life at Nandi. Altogether he was rather relieved than otherwise that the invitation would now be useless, though he was deeply regretful for the cause that made it so. He had always felt drawn towards poor Joe Renny. He deplored the little man's mismanaged life and untimely death.

Then he put the Rennys from his mind. Shaken by the crisis through which he had passed that afternoon, he had come into his sanctum to collect and adjust his thoughts, and to endeavour to arrive at some decision for the future. Georgie knew that he loved her, and he was resolved to terminate

Charles de Vitre
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again and paced th
The summer daw
to his bedroom with
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CHAPTER IX

ON Saturday afternoon Georgie Dalison sat in the summer-house at Blew Park, awaiting the arrival of the de Vitre children. Sir Joshua had driven to a distant horse-show; Ann Bail was dispensing soup and sound advice in the village; Bella was confined to her room with an imaginary chill. Therefore, Georgie was at liberty to make what preparations she chose for her expected guests, and she had ordered tea to be laid in the summer-house, with a spirit-lamp and kettle in attendance, that the children might have the additional delight of boiling the water for themselves. The place had been cleaned and cleared of rubbish, and a few gay cotton cushions made the crude seats comfortable.

The footman's unwilling journeys were over for the present, and all was ready. A bowl of crimson roses formed a glowing centre-piece; ripe fruit, home-made cakes, bread and butter, and jam sandwiches crowded the little table. The latest stable kitten had invited itself to the feast, and was engaged in darting with frantic energy up the rough wooden walls, and clinging perilously halfway to the ceiling.

Georgie looked at the tiny watch in her bracelet. The children were late. She sat gazing thoughtfully

out of the open door to where the sunshine, piercing through the tree-tops, glinted in quivering blotches on the shrubs below. White and yellow butterflies danced across the opening, with the occasional metallic streak of a blue dragon-fly, and the flashing shadow of a bird. Honeysuckle breathed its perfume over the threshold, and a pigeon cooed restfully near by.

But Georgie's soul was troubled. For the past three days her mind had been delivered over to thoughts of Stephen Dare. She had heard and seen nothing of him, and the uncertainty was affecting her nerves. The peculiarities of her aunts and uncle, and the narrow customs of the old-fashioned household had begun to irritate her as they had never done before; she felt disinclined for food; her nights were wakeful. She looked wan and harassed as she sat in the dim little arbour, still searching, remembering, examining, every detail of her intercourse with Stephen, as she had hardly ceased to do since that memorable afternoon at Daresfield.

She tried, with weary impatience, to fix her attention on other matters. She wished the children would come, and went to the door to look for them; then returned to her seat and took up a small volume she had brought out with her—Sir Alfred Lyall's 'Verses written in India.' Lately she had been reading much in connection with the vast country of which she had found herself so ignorant. She turned to the poem which attracted her most in the book, and gradually became absorbed as she read again the pitiful story of a few European prisoners in the

hands of the mutineers, who had given their victims the alternative of a cruel death or the repetition of the Mohammedan formula of belief. She could imagine the scene. The burning plain; the dark, revengeful faces of the natives pressing around the defenceless, white people, before whom they would have grovelled but a short while previously; the confident praying of the Christian believer welcoming martyrdom; the whine of the half-caste, professing Mohammed as he would have professed god or devil of any description in exchange for his life. Then the central figure of the picture—a young man, standing fierce and bitter, ready to die like a dog for 'the honour of the English race' rather than turn traitor to his country's creed, though to him individually it meant little, save as part of his national traditions. How hard to feel obliged to die for a faith that was not a personal reality; to give up life, love, friends, country, without hope of spiritual reward, or even of earthly credit, when a few meaningless words would set him free!

Unconsciously, Georgie imagined this man like Stephen; tall and well-set, with intensely blue eyes and the fair hair of a Saxon boy. What would Stephen have done in such a case? She put down the book with a confident smile. The man she loved was no coward.

A figure darkened the doorway. She looked up quickly and saw him standing there. She caught her breath. For a moment she was doubtful if it were not the work of her own fancy.

'May I come in?' he said. 'The butler told me

you were here, and I let him off escorting me, much to his relief, for I'm sure he was in the middle of his tea.'

She noticed that he was oddly talkative, that his voice was constrained, that he looked ill and tired. But his manner gave her an impression of decisiveness, as though he had deliberately sought her presence with a definite object and purpose. Her heart beat quickly, and she steadied her words with an effort.

'Of course come in. How are you? And where are the girls?'

'Poor little wretches, they are miserable because they can't come! Margaret developed a suspicious rash last evening. The doctor says it is only chicken-pox; but of course she is in bed, feverish, and very sorry for herself. Norah is in quarantine—and tears. I was sent over to break the news gently to you, and was entrusted with messages of every description.'

He did not add that Norah had earnestly besought him to do proxy for her, 'and give Georgie a hundred kisses.'

'It was nice of you to come. Poor mites! I am so sorry for them! but chicken-pox is nothing, and they will soon be all right and able to come over as much as they like. I am disappointed not to see them. And look at all my preparations! I thought they would feel aggrieved if they had tea in the house, and a picnic is always uncomfortable, so this seemed a fair compromise. We may as well keep up our spirits under the sad circumstances by having

some tea ourselves.' She lit the lamp under the kettle, and Stephen watched the movements of her delicate fingers with sombre eyes. 'How happy these children are with you at Daresfield,' she went on; 'it must be Heaven to them after London! They talked so much to me about the change when they were over here last.'

Margaret had also imparted to Georgie, as an important secret, her discovery of the fact that money had been coming home from Stephen in India ever since her father had gone blind, and the children's confidential chatter had also disclosed various details from which Georgie inferred that the family had been altogether dependent on Stephen from the date of Mr. de Vitre's misfortune. No light burden this for a man in the first years of his service unless his private means happened to be large, and Georgie knew that he had possessed nothing beyond his pay.

'Yes,' he said carelessly; 'I am very glad they are all happy.' Then he held out his hand. 'What were you reading?' he asked.

She gave the book to him open, and pointed to the page.

'It always impresses me so, that poem,' she said. 'I can see the whole thing when I read it; the horrible natives, the helpless prisoners, and the young fellow standing there remembering England and the woman he loved, and knowing he must die for something he did not really believe in. Do you know it? Read it while I pour out the tea.'

There was silence for a few minutes. Then

Stephen put down the book, and a curious expression came into his eyes.

'You think he was right—that he was not a fool?' he said.

'Heavens! no! It seems hideously cruel; but how could he have saved himself in such a way? Afterwards—supposing he had chosen life and liberty—what would they have been worth to him? Could he have married the woman he loved, knowing himself to be a traitor? Would he ever have felt free from shame? Of course there was no choice for him. But oh! the heroism—and the pity of it!'

'I suppose his death was a finer sacrifice, in a way, than the death of those who firmly believed they were going straight to Heaven,' said Stephen reflectively.

'It was splendid! He yielded his life to a high command. I should have been proud to be the woman that man cared for!'

He looked up quickly for a moment. Then took the cup she was handing him and put it down, pushing it a little away. Presently he said, with almost rough abruptness:

'India is a cursed country—it is a land of tragedies.'

'Yes,' she answered, gravely interested; 'did you know of many when you were out there?'

He glanced at her nervously, wistfully, yet still with the indefinable look of resolve on his face.

'I knew of one, certainly. At least to me it seemed a tragedy. Perhaps it might not to you. It was principally the man's own fault.'

'That makes it all the more pitiable. When people are really unhappy I could forgive them anything. Tell me the story.'

The kitten, wearied with its antics, had crept into Georgie's lap, and was lazily purring and kneading her dress. As Stephen began to speak with halting carefulness, somewhat as though he were repeating a lesson, he watched the little creature absently.

'This man went out to India with every prospect of doing well all round. He was young, and he liked having a good time; and he got it at first—had a rattling good time. Then he was sent to a beastly lonely place, right out in the jungle, where he never saw anybody. It was fifty miles off any railway, and as hot as blazes, and he loathed it—the solitude, and the ugliness, and the monotony, and everything. He stood it for some months, and then he got leave to go home for a bit. I believe—I gathered—there was someone at home he wanted to see again very badly—'

He paused, not raising his eyes.

'I understand,' she said, with sympathetic intonation. 'Well?'

She felt disquieted by his manner. It was defensive, determined, yet strangely agitated.

'Then something happened which prevented his going home, and stopped all chance of his getting out of India for years to come—if ever. He—he lost all his money, or something; it doesn't matter what. Anyway, there he was stuck in that awful place, with nothing to look forward to but endless hot weathers without leave, and no amusement, or

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it would matter; he h
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him, and he used the sanction of the service as an excuse——'

Again he paused; Georgie sat still, confused, apprehensive, vaguely frightened. What did it all mean—why was he telling her this distressing story in such an odd, persistent way, as though he wanted to impress every word of it upon her memory? She made no attempt to speak, and he went on a little more quickly.

'He lived with her for about two years and a half. He tried to educate her, but she would not learn; she was ignorant, superstitious, self-indulgent, she grew fat and ill-tempered, and in time the man loathed her. They had a child—a boy—and he was drowned in the river just when he had begun to speak and walk. Then the woman turned against the man completely. She had been nominally a Christian, but now she threw that up and went back to her old idolatry—oh! and there was so much more which I can't explain. She wanted to make a pilgrimage to holy spots, because she imagined that the child's death was an act of vengeance on the part of Kali, the goddess she worshipped; and the man let her go, thankful to be rid of her even for a short time. While she was away he was summoned home. Some money had been left to him unexpectedly. He came to England, and again he met the girl he had always really cared for with all the best that was in him, though he had not realized how much until he saw her. And then he couldn't ask her to be his wife because of that marriage service at the missionary's death-bed, because he had promised, according

to the laws of his country's Church, to regard himself as the native woman's husband. There had been no witnesses, nothing written, nothing to prove what had happened; he could have provided for her, and held his tongue, and no one need have been any the wiser. But in a measure he felt himself somewhat in the position of the fellow in that poem—he couldn't take advantage of having no particular religious convictions, he felt himself in honour bound. He wasn't morally free to ask anyone else to marry him——'

He stopped suddenly. Neither of them moved. There was a loud beating in Georgie's ears. She knew now that Stephen had been telling her his own story, explaining all that had puzzled and distressed her. She dared not look at him. Then, despairingly, she tried to convince herself that it had nothing to do with Stephen, that he had only been telling her of some other man's adversity, and that presently they would be agreeing together over the hardness of the situation, and discussing how they themselves might have acted in similar circumstances. She forced herself to speak, stroking the kitten in her lap, keeping her eyes fixed on the little fluffy body.

'What—what happened?' she said, and her voice sounded to her hoarse and indistinct.

She heard a sharp indrawing of his breath, and an involuntary movement.

'He went away,' he answered quietly.

'Without telling her? Without explaining—without the comfort of knowing she loved him, and was

proud of him? He left her doubtful, more miserable, more heartbroken than she need have been if their hearts had been opened to one another?' The words came quickly, her voice trembled.

She raised her eyes, and seeing the grim despair in his face, she lost her self-command. She leaned across the table, holding out her hands.

'Oh, Stephen, Stephen, trust me! That was your own story. I know it—I feel as if I had always known it. You are that man, and I—I——'

'You are the woman I love, Georgie; and because of that, because of it all, I must go away from you.'

She bent her forehead on the hands that were now clasping her own, and sobbed.

She felt his lips on her hair.

'Georgie,' he cried, 'darling, do you care so much? And I would have given my life to save you pain! Georgie, look up—listen to me—why should we sacrifice our lives?' He was breathless, frenzied, his voice harsh with passionate persuasion. 'What can it matter, who would care, save you and me? There is nothing between us but a few unregistered words; nobody need suffer, nobody need know. And if God Himself does know or care, surely He would pity and understand.'

The girl lifted her face, pale and tear-stained. Stephen's appeal, impelled, she knew, by his love and misery, gave her a strength that was protective, almost maternal, in its nature.

'Courage!' she said softly.

She waited till he grew calmer. Then, with tactful sympathy, she drew from him all the difficult

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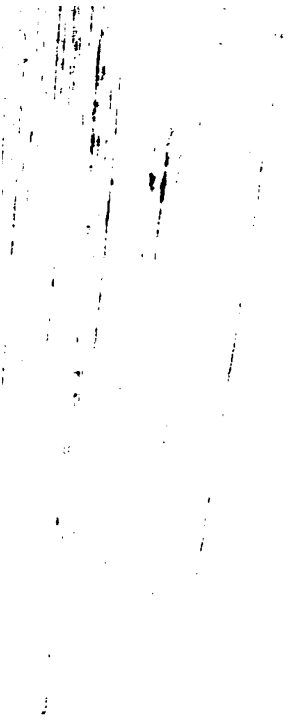
field, and I had so nearly spoken to you in the drawing-room, it seemed to me the only thing to do, and I made up my mind I would tell you everything, either directly or indirectly, and then go away. But now that you understand, it seems different. If I stay I should at least see your face sometimes, hear your voice, touch your hand, and it would make it easier.'

'No, it would all be more and more difficult,' she said, shaking her head. 'Believe me, it would be madness, a false position, and unfair to us both. You battled it out for yourself, and you made the right decision, and I am only thankful you came here this afternoon determined to let me know. I don't think I could have borne it, Stephen, if you had gone away and said nothing. It will not be half so bad for us now that we understand each other.'

'It will be bad enough,' he said hopelessly; 'but no doubt you are right. At any rate, I will do exactly what you would wish, now and always. I can give out that I have been called back officially to India. That won't astonish anybody. They all know that I haven't yet given up my appointment. I will go back and settle everything, and surely there is no need to look beyond that point now? It is just what is best for the present that we want to consider, isn't it? Perhaps something will happen, perhaps the future will not always look so dark. You must write to me, Georgie. You must let me think I am coming back soon to have a sight of your face. You must give me all the comfort that you can.'



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to endeavour, this time, to appreciate the sunsets, the atmosphere, the skies, and the contrasts of the East, which appeared to have escaped him hitherto. The children wept bitterly over his departure. Margaret, recovering from chicken-pox, was comforted with the promise of a set of bangles and a sandal-wood work-box. Norah, in the height of the ailment, refused to entertain the prospect of any gift other than a monkey.

Blew Park was suspicious, and inclined to be somewhat spiteful, and Georgie was forced to listen to conversations and remarks concerning the news that kept her in a perpetual condition of suppressed resentment.

'You may depend upon it, something unpleasant has happened,' reiterated Bella, morning, noon, and night. 'There has been nothing but mystery connected with that young man.'

'All very fine—"recalled for official reasons,"' said Sir Joshua. 'My own belief is that the black wife and drab family have been kicking up a row. He'll have to bring the whole crew back with him—and what will Miss Georgie do then, poor thing? Ah! it's only the sensible folk who never think of matrimony who know what peace means.'

It was only Ann Bail who at last suspected that Stephen Dare's movements were in some way connected with Georgie. She began to notice her niece's depression, her forced conversation, her restlessness, and want of appetite. It was Ann who insisted on inviting Stephen over to dinner two nights before he was to start, and who realized,

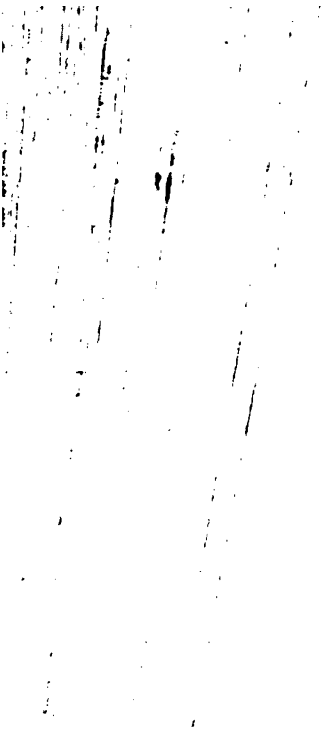
when she saw the two young people together, that they shared some secret which weighed heavily on both their minds. Therefore, when Stephen had said good-night, and astonished Bella and Joshua by his determination to walk the four miles that lay between Daresfield and Blew Park, Ann said nothing, and afterwards concealed the fact that she had subsequently seen Georgie slip out of the side-door and run across the lawn, looking like a ghost in her white dress.

That night in the summer-house, where once they had said good-bye as boy and girl, Georgie Dalison and Stephen Dare parted again, as man and woman, with aching hearts and broken murmurs of farewell.

CHAPTER X

THE atmosphere of a palm-house heated to a tropical temperature can only faintly suggest the steamy oppressiveness of an Indian railway-station, roofed in and ill-ventilated, in the middle of the rainy season. As Stephen Dare stepped out of the train late in the afternoon of a pouring, stifling day, the dull, damp thickness of the hot air pressed intolerably on his senses. The smell of spice and rancid sweetmeats, mingled with the musky odour of Oriental humanity, was sickeningly reminiscent to him. Throughout the long, hot journey from Bombay the landscapes, the people, the language, the names of the stations, had gradually been growing more familiar, till now, having arrived at the junction fifty miles from Nandi, the nature of the flat, bare land and the type of native were depressingly well known.

His small amount of luggage was soon collected by vociferating coolies, who bore it on their heads through the struggling Eastern crowd of passengers that counteracted their softness of footfall by a deafening vocal clamour. He followed the brown backs that glistened beneath his belongings to the portico of the station, where he expected to find a



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on unexpected private business, and wished to arrange for the removal of his possessions from Nandi.

'Where is the gharry I ordered?' he inquired of no one in particular.

The foremost coolie dropped his burden.

'There are no horses,' he announced with cheerful importance, 'neither here nor in the district.'

'Call the station-master,' directed Stephen laconically.

The station-master was produced—a voluble half-caste clothed in white drill trousers, a black alpaca coat, and a pipe-clayed helmet.

'Yess, it is soh unluckee!' he said, with commiserating concern; 'it is this glanders disease. Nearly all the horses in this place are dead or dying, and no one will post their animals out on the road because of the infection—not even ekka men, and those ponies are so hardee! But all the same,' he concluded with disdain, 'they would be no use, for who would ride in an ek-ka!'

'I should be very glad to do so if I could get one,' said Stephen calmly.

'Oh my!' said the station-master, regarding Dare and his luggage with doubt.

He could conceive of no one calling himself an Englishman who would be so placidly prepared to travel in such a frankly native vehicle.

Stephen reflected. He knew nobody in the place, which was merely a large railway colony clustered about the junction. The prospect of an interminable evening and an insect-haunted night in the local dak-

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stopping.'

One of his skinny brown legs appeared to be twisted and deformed, and he wore only a faded pink loin-cloth, and a white jacket much too large for him. He gazed at Stephen with twinkling black eyes that expressed benevolent interest and anxiety, and salaamed respectfully.

'Protector of the Poor! In an hour from now will the water cease falling, and this humble slave will be journeying in his ekka towards Pari and far beyond. The pony is a good one, and has now rested for six days. Fed with goor and kind words, will he do eighty miles on end. The sahib's belongings would go into the well of the ekka, and the seat is a broad one. And with but two passengers the load would still be light.'

Stephen gratefully accepted the offer.

'Very well,' he said, for there is no translation for 'Thank you' in Hindustani. 'If you think the rain will grow less, and the burden be not too great for the pony, I shall be glad to come. Will twenty rupees be sufficient as fare?'

There was a murmur of admiring envy from the crowd that had been growing steadily since Stephen's appearance. The sum seemed a fortune to people who could live on less than twopence a day, which the majority of those present were forced to do, for the district was a poor one.

The old man agreed to the sum with a dignified lack of excitement.

'The ekka, the pony, my services, and all that I have are the sahib's to do with as he will,' he said, with the natural good manners of the native. 'And

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elephant or camel. Past acres of close cultivation, now sodden and steaming; wide spaces of barren waste washed with water; through mud villages, full of barking pariah dogs and naked, yelling, brown children.

Once or twice the old driver looked back at his passenger with a curious glance of interested attention. Then suddenly he made a remark in broken English.

'What?' said Stephen, doubtful whether he had heard aright.

The sentence was proudly repeated, after which the old man relapsed into Hindustani.

'It is many years since I served a sahib,' he said. 'Since the Mutiny have I stayed in my village and farmed the plot of land which was my father's, for who would employ one with a leg that was useless?'

Stephen looked at the wrinkled, toothless countenance that was turned towards him. The road was monotonous; the pony's pace, though steady, was tediously slow; perhaps the old man's evident desire for conversation might help to pass the time.

'You are a very old man?' he said encouragingly.

'Without doubt, sahib; and my name is Kulloo. In the year of the Great Famine was I six years old—the year when the grass grew in the towns, and the wild beasts came into the streets, when the saying was that an ox sold for a piece of bread and a camel for a farthing. Children also were sold to the few who would buy them. When I was twelve my father sent me forth to take service with the sahibs,

and look after sahib-logue's children, for the seasons had been evil, and his fields were bare and our stomachs empty. And thus did I early learn to understand the ways of the white people, and to know their hearts, and to love them. But it is many years since I have spoken mouth to mouth with a veritable sahib, for my birthplace is afar off in the jungle country, and when the Government people visit it, which is but seldom, do they speak with the head-man and such like, and not with the ordinary folk.' The old man chattered, and complained of the family adversity that had compelled him to journey nearly a hundred miles to the railway-station. 'But from evil arose good,' he added, since there he had beheld the sahib standing on the steps as one perplexed, and he had been quick to seize the chance of once more doing a service for an English gentleman.

The ekka jingled on. Mile after mile was evenly covered, and the daylight wore away. Bats began to flit through the steamy air, flying-foxes, that all day had hung from the branches head downwards like black bags, now loosed their clutch and flapped weirdly across the swollen, purple sky. Fireflies sparkled in the foliage, and winged insects beat against the faces of the travellers. Crickets and frogs shrilled on every side. The distance retreated behind a thick wall of vapour, through which the metallic call of the sarus birds came muffled from the flooded marshes.

Judicious questioning presently resulted in the history of Kulloo's life, and Dare heard how the

boy-bearer, grown into a man, had become servant first to a young officer in a cavalry regiment, who had died of cholera; then to a civilian, who subsequently retired and went to England; and after that to a doctor-sahib, who apparently was not such a satisfactory master as the previous two.

'But amongst the sahibs, as amongst other people, "one is a diamond and another a bit of gravel,"' he quoted, 'and so I left the doctor-sahib and took service with a colonel-sahib of native infantry. He was a brave man, and his lady was good and beautiful, and the babbas were as little gods. I loved them all, and I served them faithfully. Never did I charge one pice more than I had paid for oil and wood, and other matters in my charge. Never did I tell the sahib or the memsahib lies, for they trusted me, and the children were often in my care. I was with them for a long time. I was with them when the Mutiny began——'

He paused, and shouted at the pony with a hoarse catch in his voice.

'And where were you all when that happened?' inquired Stephen, deeply interested.

'It was at Fatehgarh. I remember the evening when the sahib bade me and the other servants sleep in the veranda, and not go to our houses, for he feared a disturbance. The next day there was fighting and burning and stealing, and the treasury was looted, and the magazine. I went with the sahib and the memsahib and the children into the fort, and we were there for many days, besieged, while the rebels burned and plundered the shops

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English regiment. At last I beheld one, in the morning, on the march, and I went towards it with haste; but one of the soldiers, seeing me, fired, doubtless in the belief that I was a rebel. I was hit in the thigh; hence my lameness, sahib. I fell senseless before I could speak to them, and was left for dead. When I awoke I crawled to a village near by, and there I lay sick for weeks, or it may have been months—I cannot tell. Afterwards I went to my village, where little had been heard of the great trouble, for it was a long way off, and my father, who was an old man, gave me over the fields and the cattle to tend, seeing that I was lame, and could no more expect service with the sahibs. But even now do I dream of the memsahib's face when she rose in the water clutching me, and calling for the children; and often do I think of the little ones with their golden hair and blue eyes—hair and eyes such as thine, sahib. It was when I beheld thee standing on the steps that I remembered it all as but yesterday, and great was my desire to do thee service for the sake of the English people that I so loved.'

Stephen felt a quick throbbing in his throat. How sadly pathetic was this simple history of love and faith and heroism, of the loyalty of a humble native servant, unrealized save by those who were gone for ever, rewarded only by an error that had crippled him for life! Doubtless among native servants at the time of 'the great trouble' there has been many such silent tragedies that could never now be proclaimed or recompensed. To

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almost cruel in its unashamed ugliness. There are many such places in India, and Stephen wondered how it would impress anyone arriving fresh from home—young, inexperienced, enthusiastically confident that India was a country of unequalled pleasure and amusement, and then to find Pari, a place dropped down in the middle of a desert plain, with no railway, no gaiety, no relief from monotony, and numbering, perhaps, a dozen weary, commonplace inhabitants in all!

The ekka drew up at the Irrigation Officer's bungalow to which Stephen had directed his old driver. The last time he had visited it was on his way home when he had breakfasted with the Rennys, and had heard all the details of Joe Renny's latest dispute with Government; had submitted to the silent scrutiny of old Mrs. Larken; had listened, with patient attention, to Mrs. Renny's fretful complaints; and had quietly snubbed Sue's inclination to make spiteful comments on the doings of her more fortunate sister. Now the house was closed, dark, deserted. Joe Renny's successor was evidently not in the station.

A yawning orderly was roused from the office quarters.

'The sahib is away,' he said. 'He departed for Nandi with all haste some ten days since. The rain has been very heavy, and the Kali Nadi is in full flood.'

Suddenly Stephen remembered the morning when he and his Executive Engineer had stood on the aqueduct and looked up the river. 'Some day,' the

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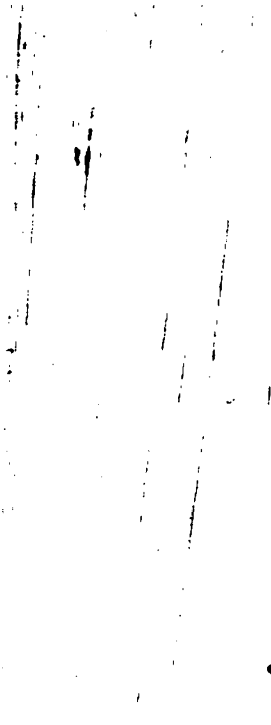
The caretaker waited with drowsy impatience. Old Kulloo watched the Englishman's face with intelligent intuition. He saw that Dare was greatly desirous of reaching his destination as soon as possible.

'My road lies north of Nandi village, sahib,' he said; 'it would be but a matter of a few miles out of my way to go there, and the pony is a good one; he can do it with ease. Since the sahib's horse is not here, how, without much inconvenience, will he get away to-morrow? To travel by night will but mean to rest in the day with the journey accomplished. Huzoor, as things are, it were better to continue in the company of this worthless one.'

Stephen demurred at first. It was unfair to give the pony so much extra work, to delay the arrival of Kulloo at his home. But the old native indignantly defended his pony's capacities—and, indeed, the endurance of the Indian ekka-pony, when dosed with a mysterious mixture of coarse sugar and opium, is known to be extraordinary—also he nearly succeeded in persuading Dare that the obligation would be entirely on his side; and finally, after the pony had been fed with a ball of sticky black substance produced from the folds of its master's garments, the ekka started again, still carrying the sahib and his luggage.

About a mile from the station they turned off to the canal bank, and found the water flowing to the brim, a condition that at this time of year could only be the result of flood, showing that somewhere ahead the banks had given way. But for the present



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type, and, laughing, he urged the pony onward—onward through the glittering moonlit night, the vast silence only deepened by the chorus of frog and cricket, the rending cry of a peacock, the lament of a lonely jackal.

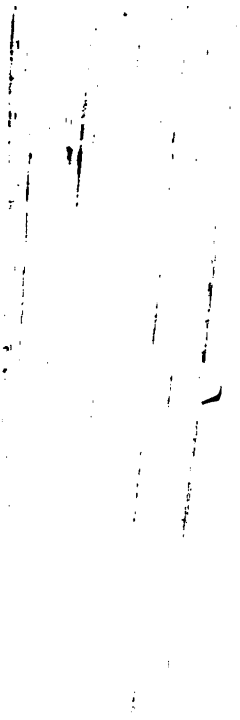
As they entered his own subdivision the trees, the banks, the very ground became familiar to Stephen. There were the sections in the plantations that he had marked out for thinning; there was the culvert he had built; the bridge that had always given him so much trouble owing to another's faulty construction. His memory travelled far back over all the time of his service, his official experience, the engineering he had learned and unlearned.

Suddenly the ekka stopped; the pony was floundering in water.

'The bank has burst here,' said Kulloo shortly; 'we must turn into the fields.'

'We can reach the bungalow if we cut across country in that direction,' suggested Stephen.

They made a wide divergence, avoiding the water that had driven, arrow-wise, far out into the fields. The pony's pace became a crawl, owing to the heaviness of the wet soil and the absence of even a cart-track. Stephen and Kulloo walked by the little animal's side encouraging him onwards, helping him over the more difficult bits of ground, till at last the bungalow came in sight—the well-remembered Nandi bungalow standing in patient isolation, with the group of servants' out-houses and the scanty trees in the compound. They were approaching



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salaamed to the ground, invoking eternal blessings on the head of the sahib, and that then the ekka had jingled away into space. He only knew vaguely that he had gone into the bungalow with the two men who spoke of a terrific flood, and offered him food, and who looked at each other oddly when he said he wanted nothing but rest; that they had showed him into a room—the room that had been Sunia's, now severe and simple with camp furniture; and that instead of going to bed he had quietly opened the veranda door and passed out into the compound alone.

What always remained sharply, indelibly clear on his brain to the end of his life, was finding himself standing on a broken, crumbling edge of ground, looking over a quiet waste of water that here and there showed tree-tops, masses of floating roof-thatch, dark indeterminate objects, débris of every sort. Near at hand he saw ruins, great blocks of broken masonry that stood up gray and stern in the moonlight like images of grotesque, prehistoric monsters. He stared at them, and slowly he understood that they were the remains of what once had been the aqueduct; that the Waters of Destruction had done their relentless work; that the prophesy of Joe Renny had been fulfilled.

His gaze wandered on, seeking the little bungalow where Sunia and Muttroo and the dogs were waiting. There was nothing to be seen save water—swollen, eddying water.

A movement behind him made him turn. Muttroo was there, bent, hollow-eyed, shaking, his hair and

'She is all that is left,'
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and the white mare, and th
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their shimmer, and a brooding calm lay over everything.

A little later Muttroo stood beside him. The old man's face was wild and eager, his sunken eyes ablaze. He pointed with crazy exultation towards the east.

'Sahib! sahib!' he shouted. 'Behold! behold, it is the morning!'

The moon had sunk, the sky was faintly tinged with topaz-yellow, for night was over and the dawn close at hand.

THE END

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